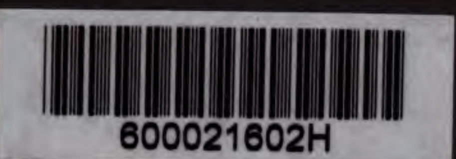
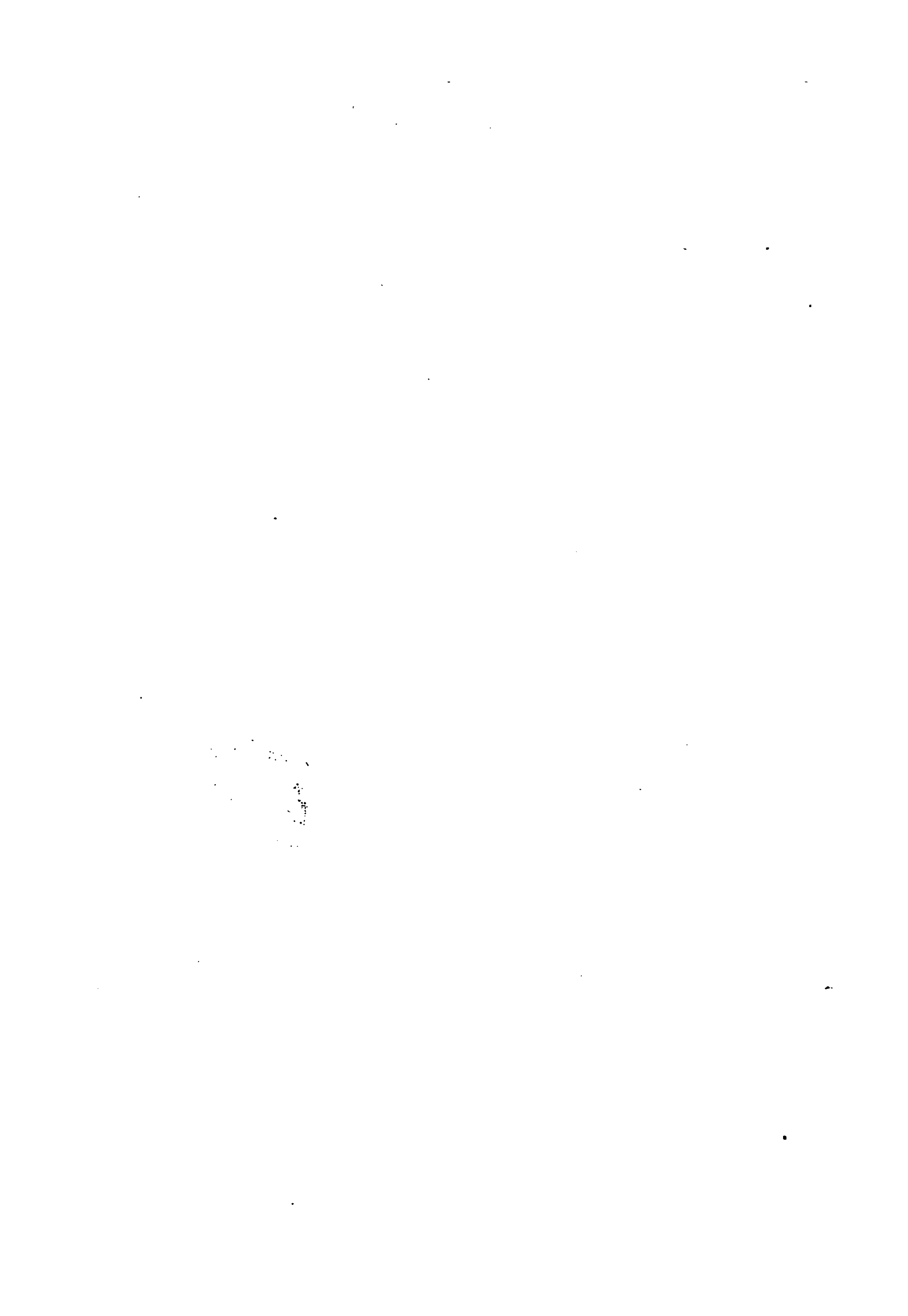





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MADONNA MARY.

BY

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AUTHOR OF

"THE LIFE OF EDWARD IRVING,"
"AGNES," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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CHAPTER I.

WILFRID was so stunned by the information thus suddenly given him, that he had but a confused consciousness of the explanations which followed. He was aware that it was all made clear to him, and that he uttered the usual words of assent and conviction; but in his mind he was too profoundly moved, too completely shaken and unsettled, to be aware of anything but the fact thus strangely communicated. It did not occur to him for a moment that it was not a fact. He saw no improbability, nothing unnatural in it. He was too young to think that anything was unlikely because it was extraordinary, or to doubt what was affirmed with so much confidence. But, in the meantime, the news was so startling, that it upset his mental balance, and made him incapable of understanding the details. Hugh was not the eldest son. It was he who was the

face to her and await her coming. His face was not the treacherous kind of face which betrays everything; but still there was in it a look of pre-occupation which Mary could not fail to see.

"Is he gone?" she said, as she came up. "You are sure he is gone, Will? It was kind of you to be civil to him; but I am almost afraid you were interested in him too."

"Would it be wrong to be interested in him?" said Will.

"I don't like him," said Mary, simply; and then she added, after a pause, "I have no confidence in him. I should be sorry to see any of my boys attracted by the society of such a man."

And it was at this moment that his new knowledge rushed upon Wilfrid's mind and embittered it; any of her boys, of whom he was the youngest and least important; and yet she must know what his real position was, and that he ought to be the chief of all.

"I don't care a straw for *him*," said Will, hastily; "but he knows a great many things, and I was interested in his talk."

"What was he saying to you?" said Mrs. Ochterlony.

He looked into her face, and he saw that there was uneasiness in it, just as she, looking at him, saw signs of a change which he was himself un-

aware of; and in his impetuosity he was very near saying it all out and betraying himself. But then his uncertainty of all the details stood him in good stead.

"He was saying lots of things," said Will. "I am sure I can't tell you all that he was saying. If I were Hugh I would not let Nelly make a mess of herself with those roses. I am going in-doors."

"A lovely evening like this is better than the best book in the world," said Mary. "Stay with me, and talk to me, Will. You see I am the only one who is left alone."

"I don't care about lovely evenings," said Will; "I think you should all come in. It is getting dreadful cold. And as for being alone, I don't see how that can be, when they are all there. Good night, mother. I think I shall go to bed."

"Why should you go to bed so early?" said Mary; but he was already gone, and did not hear her. And as he went, he turned right round and looked at Hugh and Nelly, who were still together. When Mrs. Ochterlony remarked that look, she was at once troubled and comforted. She thought her boy was jealous of the way in which his brother engrossed the young visitor, and she was sorry, but yet knew that it was not

very serious—while, at the same time, it was a comfort to her to attribute his pre-occupation to anything but Percival's conversation. So she lingered about the lawn a little, and looked wistfully at the soft twilight country, and the wistful moon. She was the only one who was alone. The two young creatures were together, and they were happy; and poor Winnie, though she was far from happy, was buoyed up by the absorbing passion and hostility which had to-day reached one of its climaxes, and had Aunt Agatha for her slave, ready to receive all the burning outburst of grievance and misery. This fiery passion which absorbed her whole being was almost as good as being happy, and gave her mind full occupation. But as for Mary, she was by herself, and all was twilight with her; and the desertion of her boy gave her a little chill at her heart. So she, too, went in presently, and had the lamp lighted, and sat alone in the room, which was bright and yet dim—with a clear circle of light round the table, yet shadowy as all the corners are of a summer evening, when there is no fire to aid the lamp. But she did not find her son there. His discontent had gone further than to be content with a book, as she had expected; and he had really disappeared for the night.

"I can't have you take possession of Nelly

like this," she said to Hugh, when, after a long interval, they came in. "We all want a share of her. Poor Will has gone to bed quite discontented. You must not keep her all to yourself."

"Oh! is he jealous?" said Hugh, laughing; and there was no more said about it; for Will's jealousy in this respect was not a thing to alarm anybody much.

But Will had not gone to bed. He was seated in his room at the table, leaning his head upon both his hands, and staring into the flame of his candle. He was trying to put what he had heard into some sort of shape. That Hugh, who was down-stairs so triumphant and successful, was, after all, a mere impostor; that it was he himself, whom nobody paid any particular attention to, who was the real heir; that his instinct had not deceived him, but from his birth he had been ill-used and oppressed: these thoughts went all circling through his mind as the moths circled round his light, taking now a larger, and now a shorter flight. This strange sense that he had been right all along was, for the moment, the first feeling in his mind. He had been disinherited and thrust aside, but still he had felt all along that it was he who was the natural heir; and there was a satisfaction in having it thus proved and established. This was the first

distinct reflection he was conscious of amid the whirl of thoughts; and then came the intoxicating sense that he could now enter upon his true position, and be able to arrange everybody's future wisely and generously, without any regard for mere proprieties, or for the younger brother's two thousand pounds. Strange to say, in the midst of this whirlwind of egotistical feeling, Will rushed all at once into imaginations that were not selfish, glorious schemes of what he would do for everybody. He was not ungenerous, nor unkind, but only it was a necessity with him that generosity and kindness should come from and not to himself.

All this passed through the boy's mind before it ever occurred to him what might be the consequences to others of his extraordinary discovery, or what effect it must have upon his mother, and the character of the family. He was self-absorbed, and it did not occur to him in that light. Even when he did come to think of it, he did it in the calmest way. No doubt his mother would be annoyed; but she deserved to be annoyed—she who had so long kept him out of his rights; and, after all, it would still be one of her sons who would have Earlston. And as for Hugh, Wilfrid had the most generous intentions towards him. There was, indeed, nothing that he was not ready

to do for his brothers. As soon as he believed that all was to be his, he felt himself the steward of the family. And then his mind glanced back upon the Psyche and the Venus, and upon Earlston, which might be made into a fitter shrine for these fair creations. These ideas filled him like wine, and went to his head, and made him dizzy; and all the time he was as unconscious of the moral harm, and domestic treachery, as if he had been one of the lower animals; and no scruple of any description, and no doubt of what it was right and necessary to do, had so much as entered into his primitive and savage mind.

We call his mind savage and primitive because it was at this moment entirely free from those complications of feeling and dreadful conflict of what is desirable, and what is right, which belong to the civilized and cultivated mind. Perhaps Will's affections were not naturally strong; but, at all events, he gave in to this temptation as a man might have given in to it in the depths of Africa, where the "good old rule" and "simple plan" still exist and reign; and where everybody takes what he has strength to take, and he keeps who can. This was the real state of the case in Wilfrid's mind. It had been supposed to be Hugh's right, and he had been obliged to give in; now it was his right, and Hugh would have

to make up his mind to it. What else was there to say? So far as Will could see, the revolution would be alike certain and instantaneous. It no more occurred to him to doubt the immediate effect of the new fact than to doubt its truth. Perhaps it was his very egotism, as well as his youth and inexperience, which made him so credulous. It had been wonder enough to him how anybody *could* leave him in an inferior position, even while he was only the youngest; to think of anybody resisting his rights, now that he had rights, was incredible.

Yet when the morning came, and the sober daylight brightened upon his dreams, Will, notwithstanding all his confidence, began to see the complication of circumstances. How was he to announce his discovery to his mother? How was he to acquaint Hugh with the change in their mutual destinies? What seemed so easy and simple to him the night before, became difficult and complicated now. He began to have a vague sense that they would insist, that Mrs. Ochterlony would fight for her honour, and Hugh for his inheritance, and that in claiming his own rights, he would have to rob his mother of her good name, and put a stigma ineffaceable upon his brother. This idea startled him, and took away his breath; but it did not make him

falter; Uncle Penrose's suggestion about buying up him and his beggarly estate, and Major Percival's evident entire indifference to the question whether anything it suited him to do was right or wrong, had had their due effect on Will. He did not see what call he had to sacrifice himself for others. No doubt, he would be sorry for the others, but after all it was his own life he had to take care of, and his own rights that he had to assert. But he mused and knitted his brows over it as he had never done before in his life. Throughout it will be seen that he regarded the business in a very sober, matter-of-fact way—not in the imaginative way which leads you to enter into other people's position, and analyse their possible feelings. As for himself, he who had been so jealous of his mother's visitors, and watched over her so keenly, did not feel somehow that horror which might have been expected at the revelation that she was not the spotless woman he thought her. Perhaps it was the importance of the revelation to himself—perhaps it was a secret disbelief in any guilt of hers—perhaps it was only the stunned condition in which the announcement left him. At all events, he was neither horrified at the thought, nor profoundly impressed by the consciousness that to prove his own rights, would

be to take away everything from her, and to shut her up from all intercourse with the honourable and pure. When the morning roused him to a sense of the difficulties as well as the advantages of his discovery, the only thing he could think of was to seek advice and direction from Percival, who was so experienced a man of the world. But it was not so easy to do this without betraying his motive. The only practical expedient was that of escorting Nelly home; which was not a privilege he was anxious for of itself; for though he was jealous that she had been taken away from him, he shrank instinctively from her company in his present state of mind. Yet it was the only thing that could be done.

When the party met at the breakfast-table, there were three of them who were ill at ease. Winnie made her appearance in a state of headache, pale and haggard as on the day of her arrival; and Aunt Agatha was pale too, and could not keep her eyes from dwelling with a too tender affectionateness upon her suffering child. And as for Will, the colour of his young face was indescribable, for youth and health still contended in it with those emotions which contract the skin and empty the veins. But on the other hand, there were Hugh and Nelly handsome and happy, with hearts full of charity to

everybody, and confidence in the brightness of their own dawning lot. Mary sat at the head of the table, with the urn before her, superintending all. The uneasiness of last night had passed from her mind; her cheek was almost as round and fair as that of the girl by her side—fairer perhaps in its way; her eyes were as bright as they had ever been; her dress, it is true, was still black, but it had not the shadowy denseness of her widow's garb of old. It was silk, that shone and gave back subdued reflections to the light, and in her hair there were still golden gleams, though mixed with here and there a thread of silver. Her mourning, which prevented any confusion of colours, but left her a sweet-complexioned woman, rich in the subdued tints of nature, in the soft austerity of black and white, did all for her that toilette could do. This was the figure which her son Wilfrid saw at the head of the pretty country breakfast-table, between the flowers and the sunshine—an unblemished matron and a beloved mother. He knew, and it came into his mind as he looked at her, that in the parish, or even in the county, there was nobody more honoured; and yet——
He kept staring at her so, and grew so white as he did so, and had so scared a look in his eyes, that Mrs. Ochterlony herself perceived it at last.

"What is the matter, Will?" she said. "I could think there was a ghost standing behind me, from your eyes. Why do you look so startled?"

"Nothing," said Will, hastily; "I didn't know I looked startled. A fellow can't help how he looks. Look here, Nelly, if you're going home to-day, I'll go with you, and see you safe there."

"You'll go with her?" said Hugh, with a kind of good-humoured elder-brotherly contempt. "Not quite so fast, Will. We can't trust young ladies in *your* care. I am going with Nelly myself."

"Oh! I am sure Will is very kind," said Nelly; and then she stopped short, and looked first at Mrs. Ochterlony and then at Hugh. Poor Nelly had heard of brothers being jealous of each other, and had read of it in books, and was half afraid that such a case was about to come under her own observation. She was much frightened, and her impulse was to accept Will's guardianship, that no harm might come of it, though the sacrifice to herself would be considerable; but then, what if Hugh should be jealous too?

"I see no reason why you should not both go," said Mrs. Ochterlony: "one of you shall

take care of Nelly, and one shall do my commissions; I think that had better be Will—for I can put no confidence, just now, in Hugh."

"Of course it must be Will," said Hugh. "A squire of dames requires age and solidity. It is not an office for a younger brother. Your time will come, old fellow; it is mine now."

"Yes, I suppose it is yours now," said Will.

He did not mean to put any extraordinary significance in his tone, but yet he was in such a condition of mind that his very voice betrayed him against his will. Even Winnie, pre-occupied as she was, intermitted her own thoughts a moment to look at him, and Hugh reddened, though he could not have told why. There was a certain menace, a certain implication of something behind, which the inexperienced boy had no intention of betraying, but which made themselves apparent in spite of him. And Hugh too grew crimson in spite of himself. He said "By Jove!" and then he laughed, and cleared his mind of it, feeling it absurd to be made angry by the petulance of his boy-brother. Then he turned to Nelly, who had drawn closer to him, fearing that the quarrel was about to take place as it takes place in novels, trembling a little, and yet by the aid of her own good sense, feeling that it could not be so serious after all.

"If we are going to the Lady's Well we must go early," he said; and his face changed when he turned to her. She was growing prettier every day,—every day at least that she spent in Hugh's society,—opening and unfolding as to the sun. Her precocious womanliness, if it had been precocious, melted under the new influence, and all the natural developments were quickened. She was more timid, more caressing, less self-reliant, and yet she was still as much as ever the head of the house at home.

"But not if it will vex Will," she said, almost in a whisper, in his ear; and the close approach which this whisper made necessary, effaced in an instant all unbrotherly feelings towards Wilfrid from Hugh's mind. They both looked at Will, instinctively, as they spoke, the girl with a little wistful solicitude in case he might be disturbed by the sight of their confidential talk. But Will was quite unmoved. He saw the two draw closer together, and perceived the confidential communication that passed between them, but his countenance did not change in the slightest degree. By this time he was far beyond that.

"You see he does not mind," said Hugh, carrying on the half-articulate colloquy, of which one half was done by thoughts instead of words; and Nelly, with the colour a little deepened on

her cheek, looked up at him with a look which Hugh could but half interpret. He saw the soft brightness, the sweet satisfaction in it tinged by a certain gleam of fun, but he did not see that Nelly was for the moment a little ashamed of herself, and was asking herself how she ever could, for a moment, have supposed that Will was jealous. It was a relief to her mind to see his indifference, and yet it filled her with shame.

When the meal was over, and they all dispersed with their different interests, it was Mary who sought to soften what she considered the disappointment of her boy. She came to him as he stood at the window under the verandah, where the day before Percival had given him his fatal illumination, and put her arm within his, and did her best to draw his secret from his clouded and musing eyes.

"My dear boy, let us give in to Hugh," said Mary; "he is only a guest now, you know, and you are at home." She was smiling when she said this, and yet it made her sigh. "And then I think he is getting fond of Nelly, and you are far too young for anything of that sort," Mrs. Ochterlony said, with anxiety and a little doubt, looking him in the face all the time.

"There are some things I am not too young for," said Will. "Mamma, if I were Hugh I

would be at home nowhere unless *you* were at home there as well."

"My dear Will, that is my own doing," said Mary. "Don't blame your brother. I have refused to go to Earlston. It will always be best for me, for all your sakes, to have a house of my own."

"If Earlston had been mine, I should not have minded your refusal," said Will. Perhaps it was as a kind of secret atonement to her and to his own heart that he said so, and yet it was done instinctively, and was the utterance of a genuine feeling. He was meditating in his heart her disgrace and downfall, and yet the first effects of it, if he could succeed, would be to lay everything that he had won by shaming her, at her feet. He would do her the uttermost cruelty and injury without flinching, and then he would overwhelm her with every honour and grandeur that his ill-got wealth could supply. And he did not see how inconsistent those two things were.

"But my boys *must* mind when I make such a decision," said Mary; and yet she was not displeased with the sentiment. "You shall go to Carlisle for me," she added. "I want some little things, and Hugh very likely would be otherwise occupied. If you would like to have a little change, and go early, do not wait

for them, Will. There is a train in half an hour."

"Yes, I would like a little change," he answered vaguely—feeling somehow, for that moment solely, a little prick of conscience. And so it was by his mother's desire to restore his good-humour and cheerfulness, that he was sent upon his mission of harm and treachery.



CHAPTER II.

WHILE Hugh showed Nelly the way to the Lady's Well with that mixture of brotherly tenderness and a dawning emotion of a much warmer kind, which is the privileged entrance of their age into real love and passion; and while Will made his with silent vehemence and ardour to Carlisle, Winnie was left very miserable in the Cottage. It was a moment of reaction after the furious excitement of the previous day. She had held him at bay, she had shown him her contempt and scorn, she had proved to him that their parting was final, and that she would never either see or listen to him again; and the excitement of doing this had so supported her that the day which Aunt Agatha thought a day of such horrible trial to her poor Winnie, was, in short, the only day in which she had snatched

a certain stormy enjoyment since she returned to the Cottage. But *the day after* was different. He was gone; he had assented to her desire, and accepted her decision to all appearance, and poor Winnie was very miserable. For the moment all seemed to her to be over. She had felt sure he would come, and the sense of the continued conflict had buoyed her up; but she did not feel so sure that he would come again, and the long struggle which had occupied her life and thoughts for so many years seemed to have come to an abrupt end, and she had nothing more to look forward to. When she realized this fact, Winnie stood aghast. It is hard when love goes out of a life; but sometimes, when it is only strife and opposition which go out of it, it is almost as hard to bear. She thought she had sighed for peace for many a long day. She had said so times without number, and written it down, and persuaded herself that was what she wanted; but now that she had got it she found out that it was not that she wanted. The Cottage was the very home of peace, and had been so for many years. Even the growth of young life within it, the active minds and varied temperaments of the three boys, and Will's cloudy and uncomfortable disposition, had not hitherto interfered with its character. But so far from being

content, Winnie's heart sank within her when she realized the fact, that War had marched off in the person of her husband, and that she was to be "left in peace,"—horrible words that paralysed her very soul.

This event, however, if it had done nothing else, had opened her mouth. Her history, which she had kept to herself, began to be revealed. She told her aunt and her sister of his misdeeds, till the energy of her narrative brought something like renewed life to her. She described how she had herself endured, how she had been left to all the dangers that attend a beautiful young woman whose husband has found superior attractions elsewhere; and she gave such sketches of the women whom she imagined to have attracted him, as only an injured wife in a chronic state of wrath and suffering could give. She was so very miserable on that morning that she had no alternative but to speak or die; and as she could not die, she gave her miseries utterance. "And if he can do you any harm—if he can strike me through my friends," said Winnie, "if you know of any point on which he could assail you, you had better keep close guard."

"Oh, my dear love!" said Aunt Agatha, with a troubled smile, "what harm could he do us? He could hurt us only in wounding you; and

now we have you safe, my darling, and can defend you, so he never can harm us."

"Of course I never meant *you*," said Winnie. "But he might perhaps harm Mary. Mary is not like you; she has had to make her way in the world, and no doubt there may be things in her life, as in other people's, that she would not care to have known."

Mary was startled by this speech, which was made half in kindness, half in anger; for the necessity of having somebody to quarrel with had been too great for Winnie. Mrs. Ochterlony was startled, but she could not help feeling sure that her secret was no secret for her sister, and she had no mind for a quarrel, though Winnie wished it.

"There is but one thing in my life that I don't wish to have known," she said, "and Major Percival knows it, and probably so do you, Winnie. But I am here among my own people, and everybody knows all about me. I don't think it would be possible to do me harm here."

"It is because you don't know him," said Winnie. "He would do the Queen harm in her own palace. You don't know what poison he can put on his arrows, and how he shoots them. I believe he will strike me through my friends."

All this time Aunt Agatha looked at the two with her lips apart, as if about to speak; but in reality it was horror and amazement that moved her. To hear them talking calmly of something that must be concealed! of something, at least, that it was better should not be known!—and that in a house which had always been so spotless, so respectable, and did not know what mystery meant!

Mary shook her head, and smiled. She haa felt a little anxious the night before about what Percival might be saying to Wilfrid; but, somehow, all that had blown away. Even Will's discontent with his brother had taken the form of jealous tenderness for herself, which, in her thinking, was quite incompatible with any revelation which could have lowered her in his eyes; and it seemed to her as if the old sting, which had so often come back to her, which had put it into the power of her friends in "the regiment" to give her now and then a prick to the heart, had lost its venom. Hugh was peacefully settled in his rights, and Will, if he had heard anything, must have nobly closed his ears to it. Sometimes this strange feeling of assurance and confidence comes on the very brink of the deadliest danger, and it was so with Mary at the present moment that she had no fear.

As for Winnie, she too was thinking principally of her own affairs, and of her sister's only as subsidiary to them. She would have rather believed in the most diabolical rage and assault than in her husband's indifference and the utter termination of hostilities between them. "He will strike me through my friends," she repeated; and perhaps in her heart she was rather glad that there still remained this oblique way of reaching her, and expressed a hope rather than a fear. This conversation was interrupted by Sir Edward, who came in more cheerfully and alertly than usual, taking off his hat as soon as he became visible through the open window. He had heard what he thought was good news, and there was satisfaction in his face.

"So Percival is here," he said. "I can't tell you how pleased I was. Come, we'll have some pleasant days yet in our old age. Why hasn't he come up to the Hall?"

There was an embarrassed pause—embarrassed at least on the part of Miss Seton and Mrs. Ochterlony; while Winnie fixed her eyes, which looked so large and wild in their sunken sockets, steadily upon him, without attempting to make any reply.

"Yes, Major Percival was here yesterday," said Aunt Agatha with hesitation; "he spent

the whole day with us—— I was very glad to have him, and I am sure he would have gone up to the Hall if he had had time—— But he was obliged to go away."

How difficult it was to say all this under the gaze of Winnie's eyes, and with the possibility of being contradicted flatly at any moment, may be imagined. And while Aunt Agatha made her faltering statement, her own look and voice contradicted her; and then there was a still more embarrassed pause, and Sir Edward looked from one to another with amazed and unquiet eyes.

"He came and spent the day with you," said their anxious neighbour, "and he was obliged to go away! I confess I think I merited different treatment. I wish I could make out what you all mean——"

"The fact is, Sir Edward," said Winnie, "that Major Percival was sent away. He is a very important person, no doubt; but he cannot do just as he pleases. My aunt is so good that she tries to keep up a little fiction, but he and I have done with each other," said Winnie in her excitement, notwithstanding that she had been up to this moment so reticent and self-contained.

"Who sent him away?" asked Sir Edward, with a pitiful, confidential look to Aunt Agatha,

and a slight shake of his head over the very bad business—a little pantomime which moved Winnie to deeeper wrath and discontent.

"*I* sent him away," said Mrs. Percival, with as much dignity as this ebullition of passion would permit her to assume.

"My dear Winnie," said Sir Edward, "I am very, very sorry to hear this. Think a little of what is before you. You are a young woman still; you are both young people. Do you mean to live here all the rest of your life, and let him go where he pleases—to destruction, I suppose, if he likes? Is that what you mean? And yet we all remember when you would not hear a word even of advice—would not listen to anybody about him. He had not been quite *sans reproche* when you married him, my dear; and you took him with a knowledge of it. If that had not been the case, there might have been some excuse. But what I want you to do is to look it in the face, and consider a little. It is not only for to-day, or to-morrow—it is for your life."

Winnie gave a momentary shudder, as if of cold, and drew her shawl closer round her. "I had rather not discuss our private affairs," she replied: "they are between ourselves."

"But the fact is, they are not between your-

selves," said Sir Edward, who was inspired by the great conviction of doing his duty. "You have taken the public into your confidence by coming here. I am a very old friend, both of yours and his, and I might do some good, if you let me try. I daresay he is not very far from here; and if I might mediate between you——"

A sudden gleam shot out of Winnie's eyes—perhaps it was a sudden wild hope—perhaps it was merely the flash of indignation; but still the proposal moved her. "Mediate!" she said, with an air which was intended for scorn; but her lips quivered as she repeated the word.

"Yes," said Sir Edward, "I might, if you would have confidence in me. No doubt there are wrongs on both sides. He has been impatient, and you have been exacting, and—— Where are you going?"

"It is no use continuing this conversation," said Winnie. "I am going to my room. If I were to have more confidence in you than I ever had in any one, it would still be useless. I have not been exacting. I have been—— But it is no matter. I trust, Aunt Agatha, that you will forgive me for going to my own room."

Sir Edward shook his head, and looked after her as she withdrew. He looked as if he had said, "I knew how it would be;" and yet he was

concerned and sorry. "I have seen such cases before," he said, when Winnie had left the room, turning to Aunt Agatha and Mary, and once more shaking his head: "neither will give in an inch. They know that they are in a miserable condition, but it is neither his fault nor hers. That is how it always is. And only the bystanders can see what faults there are on both sides."

"But I don't think Winnie is so exacting," said Aunt Agatha, with natural partisanship. "I think it is worse than that. She has been telling me two or three things——"

"Oh, yes," said Sir Edward, with mild despair, "they can tell you dozens of things. No doubt *he* could, on his side. It is always like that; and to think that nothing would have any effect on her!—she would hear no sort of reason—though you know very well you were warned that he was not immaculate before she married him: nothing would have any effect."

"Oh, Sir Edward!" cried Aunt Agatha, with tears in her eyes; "it is surely not the moment to remind us of that."

"For my part, I think it is just the moment," said Sir Edward; and he shook his head, and made a melancholy pause. Then, with an obvious effort to change the subject, he looked

round the room, as if that personage might, perhaps, be hidden in some corner, and asked where was Hugh?

"He has gone to show Nelly Askell the way to the Lady's Well," said Mary, who could not repress a smile.

"Ah! he seems disposed to show Nelly Askell the way to a great many things," said Sir Edward. "There it is again, you see! Not that I have a word to say against that little thing. She is very nice, and pretty enough; though no more to be compared to what Winnie was at her age—— But you'll see Hugh will have engaged himself and forestalled his life before we know where we are."

"It would have been better had they been a little older," said Mary; "but otherwise everything is very suitable; and Nelly is very good, and very sweet——"

Again Sir Edward sighed. "You must know that Hugh might have done a very great deal better," he said. "I don't say that I have any particular objections, but only it is an instance of your insanity in the way of marriage—all you Setons. You go and plunge into it head foremost, without a moment's reflection; and then, of course, when leisure comes—— I don't mean you, Mary. What I was saying had no

reference to you. So far as I am aware, you were always very happy, and gave your friends no trouble. Though in one way, of course, it ought to be considered that you did the worst of all."

"Captain Askell's family is very good," said Mary, by way of turning off too close an inquiry into her own affairs; "and he is just in the same position as Hugh's father was; and I love Nelly like a child of my own. I feel as if she ought to have been a child of my own. She and Will used to lie in the same cradle——"

"Ah, by the way," said Sir Edward, looking round once more into the corners, "where is Will?"

And then it had to be explained where Will had gone, which the old man thought very curious. "To Carlisle? What did he want to go to Carlisle for? If he had been out with his fishing rod, or out with the keepers, looking after the young pheasants—— But what could he want going into Carlisle? Is Percival there?"

"I hope not," said Mary, with sudden anxiety. It was an idea which had not entered into her mind before.

"Why should you hope not? If he really wants to make peace with Winnie, I should think it very natural," said Sir Edward; "and

Will is a curious sort of boy. He might be a very good sort of auxiliary in any negotiation. Depend upon it that's why he is gone."

"I think not. I think he would have told me," said Mary, feeling her heart sink with a sudden dread.

"I don't see why he should have told you," said Sir Edward, who was in one of his troublesome moods, and disposed to put everybody at sixes and sevens. "He is old enough to act a little for himself. I hope you are not one of the foolish women, Mary, that like to keep their boys always at their apron-strings?"

With this reproach Sir Edward took his leave, and made his way placidly homeward, with the tranquillity of a man who has done his duty. He felt that he had discharged the great vocation of man, at least for the past hour. Winnie had heard the truth, whether she liked it or not, and so had the other members of the family, over whom he shook his head kindly but sadly as he went home. Their impetuosity, their aptitude to rush into any scrape that presented itself—and especially their madness in respect to marriage, filled him with pity. There was Charlie Seton, for example, the father of these girls, who had married that man Penrose's sister. Sir Edward's memory was so long, that it did not

seem to him a very great stretch to go back to that. Not that the young woman was amiss in herself, but the man who, with his eyes open, burdened his unborn descendants with such an uncle, was worse than lunatic—he was criminal. This was what Sir Edward thought as he went quictly home, with a rather comfortable dreary sense of satisfaction in his heart in the thought that his own behaviour had been marked by no such aberrations; and, in the meantime, Winnie was fanning the embers of her own wrath, and Mary had sickened somehow with a sense of insecurity and unexplainable apprehension. On the other hand, the two young creatures were very happy on the road to the Lady's Well, and Will addressed himself to his strange business with resolution: and, painful as its character was, was not pained to speak of, but only excited. So ran the course of the world upon that ordinary summer day.



CHAPTER III.

OF the strangest kind were Wilfrid's sensations when he found himself in the streets of Carlisle on his extraordinary mission It was the first time he had ever taken any step absolutely by himself. To be sure, he had been brought up in full possession of the freedom of an English boy, in whose honour everybody has confidence—but never before had he been moved by an individual impulse to independent action, nor had he known what it was to have a secret in his mind, and an enterprise which had to be conducted wholly according to his own judgment, and in respect to which he could ask for no advice. When he emerged out of the railway station, and found himself actually in the streets, a thrill of excitement, sudden and strange, came over him. He had known very well all along what he was coming to do, and yet he seemed only to

become aware of it at that moment, when he put his foot upon the pavement, and was appealed to by cab-drivers, eager to take him somewhere. Here there was no time or opportunity for lingering; he had to go somewhere, and that instantly, were it only to the shops to execute his mother's innocent commissions. It might be possible to loiter and meditate on the calm country roads about Kirtell, but the town and the streets have other associations. He was there to do something, to go somewhere, and it had to be begun at once. He was not imaginative, but yet he felt a kind of palpable tearing asunder as he took his first step onward. He had hesitated, and his old life seemed to hold out its arms to him. It was not an unhappy life; he had his own way in most things, he had his future before him unfettered, and he knew that his wishes would be furthered, and everything possible done to help and encourage him. All this passed through his mind like a flash of lightning. He would be helped and cared for and made much of, but yet he would only be Will, the youngest, of whom nobody took particular notice, and who sat in the lowest room; whereas, by natural law and justice, he was the heir. After he had made that momentary comparison, he stepped on with a firm foot, and

then it was that he felt like the tearing asunder of something that had bound him. He had thrown the old bonds, the old pleasant ties, to the wind; and now all that he had to do was to push on by himself and gain his rights. This sensation made his head swim as he walked on. He had put out to sea, as it were, and the new movement made him giddy—and yet it was not pain; love was not life to him, but he had never known what it was to live without it. There seemed no reason why he should not do perfectly well for himself; Hugh would be affronted, of course—but it could make no difference to Islay, for example, nor much to his mother, for it would still be one of her sons. These were the thoughts that went through Wilfrid's mind as he walked along; from which it will be apparent that the wickedness he was about to do was not nearly so great in intention as it was in reality, and that his youth, and inexperience, and want of imagination, his incapacity to put himself into the position of another, or realize anything but his own wants and sentiments, pushed him unawares, while he contemplated only an act of selfishness, into a social crime.

But yet the sense of doing this thing entirely alone, of doing it in secret, which was contrary to all his habitudes of mind, filled him with a

strange inquietude. It hurt his conscience more to be making such a wonderful move for himself, out of the knowledge of his mother and everybody belonging to him, than to be trying to disgrace his mother and overthrow her good name and honour; of the latter, he was only dimly conscious, but the former he saw clearly. A strange paradox, apparently, but yet not without many parallels. There are poor creatures who do not hesitate at drowning themselves, and yet shrink from the chill of the "black flowing river" in which it is to be accomplished. As for Will, he did not hesitate to throw dark anguish and misery into the peaceful household he had been bred in —he did not shrink from an act which would embitter the lives of all who loved him, and change their position, and disgrace their name—but the thought of taking his first great step in life out of anybody's knowledge, made his head swim, and the light fail in his eyes—and filled him with a giddy mingling of excitement and shame. He did not realize the greater issue, except as it affected him solely—but he did the other in its fullest sense. Thus he went on through the common-place streets, with his heart throbbing in his ears, and the blood rushing to his head; and yet he was not remorseful, nor conscience-stricken, nor sorry, but only strongly excited,

and moved by a certain nervous shyness and shame.

Notwithstanding this, a certain practical faculty in Wilfrid led him, before seeking out his tempter and first informant, to seek independent testimony. It would be difficult to say what it was that turned his thoughts towards Mrs. Kirkman; but it was to her he went. The colonel's wife received him with a sweet smile, but she was busy with much more important concerns; and when she had placed him at a table covered with tracts and magazines, she took no further notice of Will. She was a woman, as has been before mentioned, who laboured under a chronic dissatisfaction with the clergy, whether as represented in the person of a regimental chaplain, or of a Dean and Chapter; and she was not content to suffer quietly, as so many people do. Her discontent was active, and expressed itself not only in lamentation and complaint, but in very active measures. She could not reappoint to the offices in the Cathedral, but she could do what was in her power, by Scripture-readers, and societies for private instruction, to make up the deficiency; and she was very busy with one of her agents when Will entered, who certainly had not come about any evangelical business. As time passed, however, and it became apparent to

him that Mrs. Kirkman was much more occupied with her other visitor than with any curiosity about his own boyish errand, whatever it might be, Will began to lose patience. When he made a little attempt to gain a hearing in his turn, he was silenced by the same sweet smile, and a clasp of the hand. "My dear boy, just a moment; what we are talking of is of the greatest importance," said Mrs. Kirkman. "There are so few real means of grace in this benighted town, and to think that souls are being lost daily, hourly—and yet such a show of services and prayers—it is terrible to think of it. In a few minutes, my dear boy."

"What I want is of the greatest importance, too," said Wilfrid, turning doggedly away from the table and the magazines.

Mrs. Kirkman looked at him, and thought she saw spiritual trouble in his eye. She was flattered that he should have thought of her under such interesting circumstances. It was a tardy but sweet compensation for all she had done, as she said to herself, for his mother; and going on this mistaken idea she dismissed the Scripture-reader, having first filled him with an adequate sense of the insufficiency of the regular clergy. It was, as so often happens, a faithful remnant, which was contending alone for true

religion against all the powers of this world. They were sure of one thing at least, and that was that everybody else was wrong. This was the idea with which her humble agent left Mrs. Kirkman; and the same feeling, sad but sweet, was in her own mind as she drew a chair to the table and sat down beside her dear young friend.

"And so you have come all the way from Kirtell to see *me,* my dear boy?" she said. "How happy I shall be if I can be of some use to you. I am afraid you wont find very much sympathy there."

"No," said Wilfrid, vaguely, not knowing in the least what she meant. "I am sorry I did not bring you some flowers, but I was in a hurry when I came away."

"Don't think of anything of the kind," said the colonel's wife, pressing his hand. "What are flowers in comparison with the one great object of our existence? Tell me about it, my dear Will; you know I have known you from a child."

"You knew I was coming then," said Will, a little surprised, "though I thought nobody knew? Yes, I suppose you have known us all our lives. What I want is to find out about my mother's marriage. I heard you

knew all about it. Of course you must have known all about it. That is what I want to understand."

"Your mother's marriage!" cried Mrs. Kirkman; and to do her justice she looked aghast. The question horrified her, and at thc same time it disappointed her. "I am sure that was not what you came to talk to me about," she said coaxingly, and with a certain charitable wile. "My dear, dear boy, don't let shyness lead you away from the greatest of all subjects. I know you came to talk to me about your soul."

"I came to ask you about my mother's marriage," said Will. His giddiness had passed by this time, and he looked her steadily in the face. It was impossible to mistake him now, or think it a matter of unimportauce or mere curiosity. Mrs. Kirkman had her faults, but she was a good woman at the bottom. She did not object to make an allusion now and then which vexed Mary, and made her aware, as it were, of the precipice by which she was always standing. It was what Mrs. Kirkman thought a good moral discipline for her friend, besides giving herself a pleasant consciousness of power and superiority; but when Mary's son sat down in

front of her, and looked with cold but eager eyes in her face, and demanded this frightful information, her heart sank within her. It made her forget for the moment all about the clergy and the defective means of grace; and brought her down to the common standing of a natural Christian woman, anxious and terror-stricken for her friend.

"What have you to do with your mother's marriage?" she said, trembling a little. "Do you know what a very strange question you are asking? Who has told you anything about that? O me! you frighten me so, I don't know what I am saying. Did Mary send you? Have you just come from your mother? If you want to know about her marriage, it is of her that you should ask information. Of course she can tell you all about it—she and your aunt Agatha. What a very strange question to ask of me!"

Wilfrid looked steadily into Mrs. Kirkman's agitated face, and saw it was all true he had heard. "If you did not know anything about it," he said, with pitiless logic, "you would say so. Why should you look so put out if there was nothing to tell?"

"I am not put out," said Mrs. Kirkman, still more disturbed. "Oh, Will, you are a dreadful

boy. What is it you want to know? What is it for? Did you tell your mother you were coming here?"

"I don't see what it matters whether I told my mother, or what it is for," said Will. "I came to you because you were good, and would not tell a lie. I can depend on what you say to me. I have heard all about it already, but I am not so sure as I should be if I had it from you."

This compliment touched the colonel's wife on a susceptible point. She calmed a little out of her fright. A boy with so just an appreciation of other people's virtues could not be meditating anything unkind or unnatural to his mother. Perhaps it would be better for Mary that he should know the rights of it; perhaps it was providential that he should have come to her, who could give him all the details.

"I don't suppose you can mean any harm," she said. "Oh, Will, our hearts are all desperately wicked. The best of us is little able to resist temptation. You are right in thinking I will tell you the truth if I tell you anything; but oh, my dear boy, if it should be to lead you to evil and not good——"

"Never mind about the evil and the good,"

said Will, impatiently. "What I want is to know what is false and what is true."

Mrs. Kirkman hesitated still; but she began to persuade herself that he might have heard something worse than the truth. She was in a great perplexity; impelled to speak, and yet frightened to death at the consequences. It was a new situation for her altogether, and she did not know how to manage it. She clasped her hands helplessly together, and the very movement suggested an idea which she grasped at, partly because she was really a sincere, good woman who believed in the efficacy of prayer, and partly, poor soul, to gain a little time, for she was at her wits' end.

"I will," she said. "I will, my dear boy; I will tell you everything; but oh, let us kneel down and have a word of prayer first, that we may not make a bad use of—of what we hear."

If she had ever been in earnest in her life it was at that moment; the tears were in her eyes, and all her little affectations of solemnity had disappeared. She could not have told anybody what it was she feared; and yet the more she looked at the boy beside her, the more she felt their positions change, and feared and stood in awe, feeling that she was for the moment

his slave, and must do anything he might command.

"Mrs. Kirkman," said Will, "I don't understand that sort of thing. I don't know what bad use you can think I am going to make of it;—at all events it wont be your fault. I shall not detain you five minutes if you will only tell me what I want to know."

And she did tell him accordingly, not knowing how to resist, and warmed in the telling in spite of herself, and could not but let him know that she thought it was for Mary's good, and to bring her to a sense of the vanity of all earthly things. She gave him scrupulously all the details. The story flowed out upon Will's hungry ears with scarcely a pause. She told him all about the marriage, where it had happened, and who had performed it, and who had been present. Little Hugh had been present. She had no doubt he would remember, if it was recalled to his memory. Mrs. Kirkman recollected perfectly the look that Mary had thrown at her husband when she saw the child there. Poor Mary! she had thought so much of reputation and a good name. She had been so much thought of in the regiment. They all called her by that ridiculous name, Madonna Mary—and made so much of her, before——

"And did they not make much of her after?" said Will, quickly.

"It is a different thing," said Mrs. Kirkman, softly shaking her long curls and returning to herself. "A poor sinner returning to the right way ought to be more warmly welcomed than even the best, if we can call any human creature good; but——"

"Is it my mother you call a poor sinner?" asked Will.

Then there was a pause. Mrs. Kirkman shook her head once more, and shook the long curls that hung over her cheeks; but it was difficult to answer. "We are all poor sinners," she said. "Oh, my dear boy, if I could only persuade you how much more important it is to think of your own soul. If your poor dear mamma has done wrong, it is God who is her judge. I never judged her for my part, I never made any difference. I hope I know my own shortcomings too well for that."

"I thought I heard you say something odd to her once," said Will. "I should just like to see any one uncivil to my mother. But that's not the question. I want that Mr. Churchill's address, please."

"I can truly say I never made any difference," said Mrs. Kirkman; "some people might have

blamed me—but I always thought of the Mary that loved much——Oh, Will, what comforting words! I hope your dear mother has long, long ago repented of her error. Perhaps your father deceived her, as she was so young; perhaps it was all true the strange story he told about the register being burnt, and all that. We all thought it was best not to inquire into it. We know what we saw; but remember, you have pledged your word not to make any dispeace with what I have told you. You are not to make a disturbance in the family about it. It is all over and past, and everybody has agreed to forget it. You are not going to make any dispeace——"

"I never thought of making any dispeace," said Will; but that was all he said. He was brief, as he always was, and uncommunicative, and inclined, now he had got all he wanted, to get up abruptly and go away.

"And now, my dear young friend, you must do something for me," said Mrs. Kirkman, "in repayment for what I have done for you. You must read these, and you must not only read them, but think over them, and seek light where it is to be found. Oh, my dear boy, how anxious we are to search into any little mystery in connexion with ourselves, and how little

we think of the mysteries of eternity! You must promise to give a little attention to this great theme before this day has come to an end."

"Oh, yes, I'll read them," said Will, and he thrust into his pocket a roll of tracts she gave him without any further thought what they were. The truth was, that he did not pay much attention to what she was saying; his head had begun to throb and feel giddy again, and he had a rushing in his ears. He had it all in his hands now, and the sense of his power overwhelmed him. He had never had such an instrument in his hands before, he had never known what it was to be capable of moving anybody, except to momentary displeasure or anxiety; and he felt as a man might feel in whose hand there had suddenly been placed the most powerful of weapons, with unlimited license to use it as he would—to break down castles with it or crowns, or slay armies at a blow—and only his own absolute pleasure to decide when or where it should fall. Something of intoxication and yet of alarm was in that first sense of power. He was rapt into a kind of ecstasy, and yet he was alarmed and afraid. He thrust the tracts into his pocket, and he received, cavalierly enough, Mrs. Kirkman's parting salu-

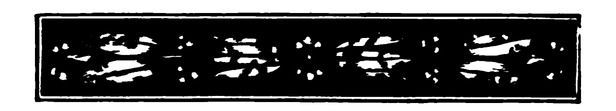
tations. He had got all he wanted from her, and Will's was not a nature to be very expansive in the way of gratitude. Perhaps even, any sort of dim moral sense he might have on the subject, made him feel that in the news he had just heard there was not much room for gratitude. Anyhow he made very little pretence at those hollow forms of courtesy which are current in the elder world. He went away having got what he wanted, and left the colonel's wife in a state of strange excitement and growing compunction. Oddly enough, Will's scanty courtesy roused more compunctions in her mind than anything else had done. She had put Mary's fate, as it were, into the hands of a boy who had so little sense of what was right as to withdraw in the most summary and abrupt way the moment his curiosity was satisfied; who had not even grace enough, or self-control enough, to go through the ordinary decorums, or pay common attention to what she said to him; and now this inexperienced undisciplined lad had an incalculable power in his hands—power to crush and ruin his own family, to dispossess his brother and disgrace his mother: and nothing but his own forbearance or good pleasure to limit him. What had she done?

Will walked about the streets for a full hour

after, dizzy with the same extraordinary, intoxicating, alarming sense of power. Before, it had all been vague, now it was distinct and clear; and even beyond his desire to "right" himself, came the inclination to set this strange machine in motion, and try his new strength. He was still so much a boy, that he was curious to see the effect it would produce, eager to ascertain how it would work, and what it could do. He was like a child in possession of an infernal machine, longing to try it, and yet not unconscious of the probable mischief. The sense of his power went to his head, and intoxicated him like wine. Here it was all ready in his hands, an instrument which could take away more than life, and he was afraid of it, and of the strength of the recoil: and yet was full of eagerness to see it go off, and see what results it would actually bring forth. He walked about the town, not knowing where he was going, forgetting all about his mother's commissions, and all about Percival, which was more extraordinary—solely occupied with the sensation that the power was in his hands. He went into the cathedral, and walked all round it, and never knew he had been there; and when at last he found himself at the railway station again, he woke up again abruptly, as if he had been in a dream. Then making an effort he set his wits

to work about Percival, and asked himself what he was to do. Percival was nothing to Will: he was his Aunt Winnie's husband, and perhaps had not used her well, and he could furnish no information half so clear or distinct as that which Mrs. Kirkman had given. Will did not see any reason in particular why he should go out of his way to seek such a man out. He had been no doubt his first informant, but in his present position of power and superiority, he did not feel that he had any need of Percival. And why should he seek him out? When he had sufficiently recovered his senses to go through this reasoning, Will went deliberately back to town again, and executed his mother's commissions. He went to several shops, and gave orders which she had charged him with, and even took the trouble to choose the things she wanted, in the most painstaking way, and was as concerned that they should be right as if he had been the most dutiful and tender of sons; and all the while he was thinking to ruin her, and disgrace her, and put the last stigma upon her name, and render her an outcast from the peaceful world. Such was the strange contradiction that existed within him; he went back without speaking to any one, without seeing anybody, knitting his brows and thinking all the way. The train that

carried him home, with his weapon in his hands, passed with a rush and shriek the train which was conveying Nelly, with a great basket of flowers in her lap, and a vague gleam of infinite content in her eyes, back to her nursery and her duties, with Hugh by her side, who was taking care of her, and losing himself, if there had been any harm in it. That sweet loss and gain was going on imperceptibly in the carriage where the one brother sat happy as a young prince, when the other brother shot past as it were on wings of flame like a destroying angel. Neither thought of the other as they thus crossed, the one being busy with the pre-occupation of young love, the other lost in a passion, which was not hate, nor even enmity, which was not inconsistent with a kind of natural affection, and yet involved destruction and injury of the darkest and most overwhelming kind. Contrasts so sharply and clearly pointed occur but seldom in a world so full of modifications and complicated interests; yet they do occur sometimes. And this was how it was with Mary's boys.



CHAPTER IV.

WHEN Wilfrid reached home, he found his mother by herself in the drawing-room. Winnie had a headache, or some other of those aches which depend upon temper and the state of the mind, and Aunt Agatha was sitting by her, in the darkened room, with bottles of eau de Cologne, and sal volatile, and smelling salts, and all the paraphernalia of this kind of indisposition. Aunt Agatha had been apt to take headaches herself in her younger days when she happened to be crossed, and she was not without an idea that it was a very orthodox resource for a woman when she could not have her own way. And thus they were shut up, exchanging confidences. It did poor Winnie good, and it did not do Miss Seton any harm. And Mary was alone downstairs. She was not looking so bright as when Wilfrid went away. The idea which Sir Edward

had suggested to her, even if it had taken no hold of her mind, had breathed on her a possible cloud; and she looked up wistfully at her boy as he came in. Wilfrid, too, bore upon his face, to some extent, the marks of what he had been doing; but then his mother did not know what he had been doing, and could not guess what the dimness meant which was over his countenance. It was not a bright face at any time, but was often lost in mists, and its meaning veiled from his mother's eyes; and she could not follow him, this time any more than other times, into the uncertain depths. All she could do was to look at him wistfully, and long to see a little clearer, and wonder, as she had so often wondered, how it was that his thoughts and ways were so often out of her ken—how it was that children could go so far away, and be so wholly sundered, even while at the very side of those who had nursed them on their knees, and trained them to think and feel. A standing wonder, and yet the commonest thing in nature. Mary felt it over again with double force to-day, as he came and brought her her wool and bits of ribbon, and she looked into his face and did not know what its meaning was.

As for Will, it was a curious sensation for him, too, on his part. It was such an oppor-

tunity as he could scarcely have looked for, for opening to his mother the great discovery he had made, and the great changes that might follow. He could have had it all out with her and put his power into operation, and seen what its effects were, without fear of being disturbed. But he shrank from it, he could not tell why. He was not a boy of very fastidious feelings, but still to sit there facing her and look into her face, and tell her that he had been inquiring into her past life, and had found out her secret, was more than Will was capable of. To meditate doing it, and to think over what he would say, and to arrange the words in which be would tell her that it was still one of her sons who would have Earlston—was a very different thing from fairly looking her in the face and doing it. He stared at her for a moment in a way which startled Mary; and then the impossibility became evident to him, and he turned his eyes away from her and sat down.

"You look a little strange, Will," said Mary. "Are you tired, or has anything happened? You startled me just now, you looked so pale."

"No, I am not tired," said Will, in his curt way. "I don't know anything about being pale."

"Well, you never were very rosy," said Mrs.

Ochterlony. "I did not expect you so soon. I thought you would have gone to the Askells', and come home with Hugh."

"I never thought of that. I thought you wanted your wool and things," said Will.

It was very slight, ordinary talk, and yet it was quivering with meaning on both sides, though neither knew what the other's meaning was. Will, for his part, was answering his mother's questions with something like the suppressed mania of homicide within him, not quite knowing whether at any moment the subdued purpose might not break out, and kill, and reveal itself; whereas his mother, totally unsuspecting how far things had gone, was longing to discover whether Percival had gained any power over him, and what that adversary's tactics were.

"Have you seen anybody?" she said. "By the way, Sir Edward was talking of Major Percival—he seemed to think that he might still be in Carlisle. Did you by any chance see anything of him there?"

She fixed her eyes full upon him as she spoke, but Will did not in any way shrink from her eyes.

"No," he said, carelessly. "I did not see him. He told me he was going to stay a day or two in Carlisle, but I did not look out for him, particularly. He gets to be a bore after the first."

When Mary heard this, her face cleared up like the sky after a storm. It had been all folly, and once more she had made herself unhappy about nothing. How absurd it was! Percival was wicked, but still he had no cause to fix any quarrel upon her, or poison the mind of her son. It was on Winnie's account he came, and on Winnie's account, no doubt, he was staying; and in all likelihood Mrs. Ochterlony and her boys were as utterly unimportant to him, as in ordinary circumstances he was to them. Mary made thus the mistake by which a tolerant and open mind, not too much occupied about itself, sometimes goes astray. People go wrong much more frequently from thinking too much of themselves, and seeing their own shadow across everybody's way; but yet there may be danger even in the lack of egotism: and thus it was that Mary's face cleared up, and her doubts dispersed, just at the moment when she had most to dread.

Then there was a pause, and the homicidal impulse, so to speak, took possession of Will. He was playing with the things he had bought, putting them into symmetrical and unsymmetrical shapes on the table, and when he suddenly said "Mother," Mrs. Ochterlony turned to him with a smile. He said "Mother," and then he stopped short, and picked to pieces the construc-

tion he was making, but at the same time he never raised his eyes.

"Well, Will?" said Mary.

And then there was a brief, but sharp, momentary struggle in his mind. He meant to speak, and wanted to speak, but could not. His throat seemed to close with a jerk when he tried; the words would not come from his lips. It was not that he was ashamed of what he was going to do, or that any sudden compunction for his mother seized him. It was a kind of spasm of impossibility, as much physical as mental. He could no more do it, than he could lift the Cottage from its solid foundations. He went on arranging the little parcels on the table into shapes, square, oblong, and triangular, his fingers busy, but his mind much more busy, his eyes looking at nothing, and his lips unable to articulate a single word.

"Well, Will, what were you going to say?" said Mary, again.

"Nothing," said Will; and he got up and went away with an abruptness which made his mother wonder and smile. It was only Willy's way; but it was an exaggerated specimen of Will's way. She thought to herself when he was gone, with regret, that it was a great pity he was so abrupt. It did not matter at home,

where everybody knew him; but among strangers, where people did not know him, it might do him so much injury. Poor Will! but he knew nothing about Percival, and cared nothing, and Mary was ashamed of her momentary fear.

As for the boy himself, he went out, and took himself to task, and felt all over him a novel kind of tremor, a sense of strange excitement, the feeling of one who had escaped a great danger. But that was not all the feeling which ought to have been in his mind. He had neglected and lost a great opportunity, and though it was not difficult to make opportunities, Will felt by instinct that his mother's mere presence had defeated him. He could not tell her of the discovery he had made. He might write her a letter about it, or send the news to her at second-hand; but to look in her face and tell her, was impossible. To sit down there by her side, and meet her eyes, and tell her that he had been making inquiries into her character, and that she was not the woman she was supposed to be, nor was the position of her children such as the world imagined, was an enterprise which Wilfrid had once and for ever proved impossible. He stood blank before this difficulty which lay at the very beginning of his undertaking; he had not only failed, but he saw that he must for ever fail. It

amazed him, but he felt it was final. His mouth was closed, and he could not speak.

And then he thought he would wait until Hugh came home. Hugh was not his mother, nor a woman. He was no more than Will's equal at the best, and perhaps even his inferior; and to him, surely, it could be said. He waited for a long time, and kept lingering about the roads, wondering what train his brother would come by, and feeling somehow reluctant to go in again, so long as his mother was alone. For in Mrs. Ochterlony's presence Will could not forget that he had a secret—that he had done something out of her knowledge, and had something of the most momentous character to tell her, and yet could not tell it to her. It would be different with Hugh. He waited loitering about upon the dusty summer roads, biting his nails to the quick, and labouring hard through a sea of thought. This telling was disagreeable, even when it was only Hugh that had to be told—more disagreeable than anything else about the business, far more disagreeable, certainly, than he had anticipated it would be; and Wilfrid did not quite make out how it was that a simple fact should be so difficult to communicate. It enlarged his views so far, and gave him a glimpse into the complications of maturer life, but it did

not in any way divert him from his purpose, or change his ideas about his rights. At length the train appeared by which it was certain Hugh must come home. Wilfrid sauntered along the road within sight of the little station to meet his brother, and yet when he saw Hugh actually approaching, his heart gave a jump in his breast. The moment had come, and he must do it, which was a very different thing from thinking it over, and planning what he was to say.

"You here, Will!" said Hugh. "I looked for you in Carlisle. Why didn't you go to Mrs. Askell's and wait for me?"

"I had other things to do," said Will, briefly.

Hugh laughed. "Very important things, I have no doubt," he said; "but still you might have waited for me, all the same. How is Aunt Winnie? I saw that fellow,—that husband of hers,—at the station. I should like to know what he wants hanging about here."

"He wants *her*, perhaps," said Will, though with another jump of his heart.

"He had better not come and bother her," said Hugh. "She may not be perfect herself, but I wont stand it. She is my mother's sister, after all, and she is a woman. I hope you wont encourage him to hang about here."

"*I!*" cried Will, with amazement and indignation.

"Yes," said Hugh, with elder-brotherly severity. "Not that I think you would mean any harm by it, Will; it is not a sort of thing you can be expected to understand. A fellow like that should be kept at a distance. When a man behaves badly to a woman—to his wife—to such a beautiful creature as she has been——"

"I don't see anything very beautiful about her," said Will.

"That doesn't matter," said Hugh, who was hot and excited, having been taken into Winnie's confidence. "She has been beautiful, and that's enough. Indeed, she ought to be beautiful now, if that fellow hadn't been a brute. And if he means to come back here——"

"Perhaps it is not her he wants," said Will, whose profound self-consciousness made him play quite a new part in the dialogue.

"What could he want else?" said Hugh, with scorn. "You may be sure it is no affection for any of *us* that brings him here."

Here was the opportunity, if Will could but have taken it. Now was the moment to tell him that something other than Winnie might be in Percival's mind—that it was his own fortune, and not hers, that hung in the balance. But

Will was dumb; his lips were sealed; his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. It was not his will that was in fault. It was a rebellion of all his physical powers, a rising up of nature against his purpose. He was silent in spite of himself; he said not another word as they walked on together. He suffered Hugh to stray into talk about the Askells, about the Museum, about anything or nothing. Once or twice he interrupted the conversation abruptly with some half-dozen words, which brought it to a sudden stop, and gave him the opportunity of broaching his own subject. But when he came to that point he was struck dumb. Hugh, all innocent and unconscious, in serene elderly-brotherly superiority, good humoured and condescending, and carelessly affectionate, was as difficult to deal with as Mary herself. Without withdrawing from his undertaking, or giving up his "rights," Wilfrid felt himself helpless; he could not say it out. It seemed to him now that so far from giving in to it, as he once imagined, without controversy, Hugh equally without controversy would set it aside as something monstrous, and that his new hope would be extinguished and come to an end if his elder brother had the opportunity of thus putting it down at once. When they reached home, Will withdrew to his own

room, with a sense of being baffled and defeated —defeated before he had struck a blow. He did not come downstairs again, as they remembered afterwards—he did not want any tea. He had not a headache, as Aunt Agatha, now relieved from attendance upon Winnie, immediately suggested. All he wanted was to be left alone, for he had something to do. This was the message that came downstairs. "He is working a great deal too much," said Aunt Agatha, "you will see he will hurt his brain or something; while Hugh, too, whispered to his mother, "You shall see! *I* never did much, but Will will go in for all sorts of honours," the generous fellow whispered in his mother's ear; and Mary smiled, in her heart thinking so too. If they had seen Will at the moment sitting with his face supported by both his hands, biting his nails and knitting his brows, and pondering more intently than any man ever pondered over classic puzzle or scientific problem, they might have been startled out of those pleasant thoughts.

And yet the problem he was considering was one that racked his brain, and made his head ache, had he been sufficiently at leisure to feel it. The more impossible he felt it to explain himself and make his claim, the more obstinately determined was he to make it, and have what belonged

to him. His discouragement and sense of defeat did but intensify his resolution. He had failed to speak, notwithstanding his opportunities; but he could write, or he could employ another voice as his interpreter. With all his egotism and determination, Wilfrid was young, nothing but a boy, and inexperienced, and at a loss what to do. Everything seemed easy to him until he tried to do it; and when he tried, everything seemed impossible. He had thought it the most ordinary affair in the world to tell his discovery to his mother and brother, until the moment came which in both cases proved the communication to be beyond his powers. And now he thought he could write. After long pondering, he got up and opened the little desk upon which he had for years written his verses and exercises, troubled by nothing worse than a doubtful quantity, and made an endeavour to carry out his last idea. Will's style was not a bad style. It was brief and terse, and to the point,—a remarkable kind of diction for a boy,—but he did not find that it suited his present purpose. He put himself to torture over his letters. He tried it first in one way, and then in another; but however he put it, he felt within himself that it would not do. He had no sort of harsh or unnatural meaning in his mind. They were still his mother and

brother to whom he wanted to write, and he had no inclination to wound their feelings, or to be disrespectful or unkind. In short, it only required this change, and his establishment in what he supposed his just position, to make him the kindest and best of sons and brothers. He toiled over his letters as he had never toiled over anything in his life. He could not tell how to express himself, nor even what to say. He addressed his mother first, and then Hugh, and then his mother again; but the more he laboured the more impossible he found his task. When Mrs. Ochterlony came upstairs and opened his door to see what her boy was about, Wilfrid stumbled up from his seat red and heated, and shut up his desk, and faced her with an air of confusion and trouble which she could not understand. It was not too late even then to bring her in and tell her all; and this possibility bewildered Will, and filled him with agitation and excitement, to which naturally his mother had no clue.

"What is the matter?" she said, anxiously; "are you ill, Will? Have you a headache? I thought you were in bed."

"No, I am all right," said Will, facing her with a look, which in its confusion seemed sullen. "I am busy. It is too soon to go to bed."

"Tell me what is wrong," said Mary, coming

a step further into the room. "Will, my dear boy, I am sure you are not well. You have not been quarrelling with any one—with Hugh—— ?"

"With Hugh!" said Will, with a little scorn; "why should I quarrel with Hugh?"

"Why, indeed!" said Mrs. Ochterlony, smiling faintly; "but you do not look like yourself. Tell me what you have been doing, at least."

Will's heart thumped against his breast. He might put her into the chair by which she was standing, and tell her everything, and have it over. This possibility still remained to him. He stood for a second and looked at her, and grew breathless with excitement, but then somehow his voice seemed to die away in his throat.

"If I were to tell you what I was doing, you would not understand it," he said, repeating mechanically words which he had used in good faith, with innocent schoolboy arrogance, many a time before. As for Mary, she looked at him wistfully, seeing something in his eyes which she could not interpret. They had never been candid, frank eyes like Hugh's. Often enough before, they had been impatient of her scrutiny, and had veiled their meaning with an apparent blank; but yet there had never been any actual harm

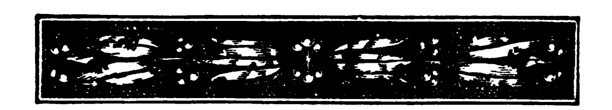
hid by the artifice. Mary sighed; but she did not insist, knowing how useless it was. If it was anything, perhaps it was some boyish jealousy about Nelly,—an imaginary feeling which would pass away, and leave no trace behind. But, whatever it was, it was vain to think of finding it out by questions; and she gave him her good-night kiss and left him, comforting herself with the thought that most likely it was only one of Will's uncomfortable moments, and would be over by to-morrow. But when his mother went away, Will for his part sank down, with the strangest tremor, in his chair. Never before in his life had this sick and breathless excitement, this impulse of the mind and resistance of the flesh, been known to him, and he could not bear it. It seemed to him he never could stand in her presence, never feel his mother's eyes upon him, without feeling that now was the moment that he must and ought to tell her, and yet could not tell her, no more than if he were speechless. He had never felt very deeply all his life before, and the sense of this struggle took all his strength from him. It made his heart beat, so that the room and the house and the very solid earth on which he stood seemed to throb and tingle round him; it was like standing for ever on the edge of a precipice over

which the slightest movement would throw him, and the very air seemed to rush against his ears as it would do if he were falling. He sank down into his chair, and his heart beat, and the pulses throbbed in his temples. What was he to do?—he could not speak, he could not write, and yet it must be told, and his rights gained, and the one change made which should convert him into the tenderest son, the most helpful brother, that ever man or woman had. At last, in his despair and pertinacity, there came into his mind that grand expedient which occurs naturally to everything that is young and unreasonable under the pressure of unusual trials. He would go away;—he could not go on seeing them continually, with this communication always ready to break from the lips which would not utter it,—nor could he write to them while he was still with them, and when any letter must be followed by an immediate explanation. But he could fly; and when he was at a safe distance, then he could tell them. No doubt it was cowardice to a certain extent; but there were other things as well. Partly it was impatience, and partly the absoluteness and imperious temper of youth, and that intolerance of everything painful which comes natural to it. He sat in his chair, noiseless and thinking, in the stillness of night, a poor

young soul, tempted and yielding to temptation, sinful, yet scarcely conscious how sinful he was, and yet at the same time forlorn with that profound forlornness of egotism and ill-doing which is almost pathetic in the young. He could consult nobody, take no one into his confidence. The only counsellors he had known in all his small experience were precisely those upon whom he was about to turn. He was alone, and had everything to plan, everything to do for himself.

And yet was there nobody whom he could take into his confidence? Suddenly, in the stillness of the night a certain prosperous, comfortable figure came into the boy's mind—one who thought it was well to get money and wealth and power, anyhow except dishonestly, which of course was an impracticable and impolitic way. When that idea came to him like an inspiration, Will gave a little start, and looked up, and saw the blue dawn making all the bars of his window visible against the white blind that covered it. Night was gone with its dark counsels, and the day had come. What he did after that was to take out his boy's purse, and count over carefully all the money it contained. It was not much, but yet it was enough. Then he took his first great final step in life, with a heart that beat in his

ears, but not loud enough to betray him. He went downstairs softly as the dawn brightened, and all the dim staircase and closed doors grew visible, revealed by the silent growth of the early light. Nobody heard him, nobody dreamed that any secret step could ever glide down those stairs or out of the innocent honest house. He was the youngest in it, and should have been the most innocent; and he thought he meant no evil. Was it not his right he was going to claim? He went softly out, going through the drawing-room window, which it was safer to leave open than the door, and across the lawn, which made no sound beneath his foot. The air of the summer morning was like balm, and soothed him, and the blueness brightened and grew rosy as he went his way among the early dews. The only spot on which, like Gideon's fleece, no dew had fallen, was poor Will's beating heart, as he went away in silence and secrecy from his mother's door.



CHAPTER V.

THE breakfast-table in the Cottage was as cheerful as usual next morning, and showed no premonitory shadow. Winnie did not come downstairs early; and perhaps it was all the more cheerful for her absence. And there were flowers on the table, and everything looked bright. Will was absent, it is true, but nobody took much notice of that as yet. He might be late, or he might have gone out; and he was not a boy to be long negligent of the necessities of nature. Aunt Agatha even thought it necessary to order something additional to be kept hot for him. "He has gone out, I suppose," Miss Seton said; "and it is rather cold this morning, and a long walk in this air will make the boy as hungry as a hunter. Tell Peggy not to cook that trout till she hears him come in."

The maid looked perturbed and breathless;

but she said, "Yes, ma'am," humbly—as if it was she who was in the wrong; and the conversation and the meal were resumed. A minute or two after, however, she appeared once more: "If you please, there's somebody asking for Mr. Hugh," said the frightened girl, standing, nervous and panting, with her hand upon the door.

"Somebody for me?" said Hugh. "The game-keeper, I suppose; he need not have been in such a hurry. Let him come in, and wait a little. I'll be ready presently."

"But, my dear boy," said Aunt Agatha, "you must not waste the man's time. It is Sir Edward's time, you know; and he may have quantities of things to do. Go and see what he wants: and your mother will not fill out your coffee till you come back."

And Hugh went out, half laughing, half grumbling—but he laughed no more, when he saw Peggy standing severe and pale at the kitchen door, waiting for him. "Mr. Hugh," said Peggy, with the aspect of a chief justice, "tell me this moment, on your conscience, is there any quarrel or disagreement between your brother and you?"

"My brother and me? Do you mean Will?" said Hugh, in amazement. "Not the slightest.

What do you mean? We were never better friends in our life."

"God be thanked!" said Peggy; and then she took him by the arm, and led the astonished young man upstairs to Will's room. "He's never sleepit in that bed this night. His little bag's gone, with a change in't. He's putten on another pair of boots. Where is the laddie gone? And me that'll have to face his mother, and tell her she's lost her bairn!"

"Lost her bairn! Nonsense," cried Hugh, aghast; "he's only gone out for a walk."

"When a boy like that goes out for a walk, he does not take a change with him," said Peggy. "He may be lying in Kirtell deeps for anything we can tell. And me that will have to break it to his mother——."

Hugh stood still in consternation for a moment, and then he burst into an agitated laugh. "He would not have taken a change with him, as you say, into Kirtell deeps," he said. "Nonsense, Peggy! Are you sure he has not been in bed? Don't you go and frighten my mother. And, indeed, I daresay he does not always go to bed. I see his light burning all the night through, sometimes. Peggy, don't go and put such ridiculous ideas into people's heads. Will has gone out to walk, as usual.

There he is, downstairs. I hear him coming in: make haste, and cook his trout."

Hugh, however, was so frightened himself by all the terrors of inexperience, that he precipitated himself downstairs, to see if it was really Will who had entered. It was not Will, however, but a boy from the railway, with a note, in Will's handwriting, addressed to his mother, which took all the colour out of Hugh's cheeks—for he was still a boy, and new to life, and did not think of any such easy demonstration of discontent as that of going to visit Uncle Penrose. He went into the breakfast-room with so pale a face, that both the ladies got up in dismay, and made a rush at him to know what it was.

"It is nothing," said Hugh, breathless, waving them off, "nothing—only a note—I have not read it yet—wait a little. Mother, don't be afraid."

"What is there to be afraid of?" asked Mary, in amazement and dismay.

And then Hugh again burst into an unsteady and tremulous laugh. He had read the note, and threw it at his mother with an immense load lifted off his heart, and feeling wildly gay in the revulsion. "There's nothing to be frightened about," said Hugh. "By Jove! to

think the fellow has no more taste—gone off to see Uncle Penrose. I wish them joy!"

"Who is it that has gone to visit Mr. Penrose?" said Aunt Agatha; and Hugh burst into an explanation, while Mary, not by any means so much relieved, read her boy's letter.

"I confess I got a fright," said Hugh. "Peggy dragged me upstairs to show me that he had not slept in his bed, and said his carpet-bag was gone, and insinuated—I don't know what—that we had quarrelled, and all sorts of horrors. But he's gone to see Uncle Penrose. It's all right, mother; I always thought it was all right."

"And had you quarrelled?" asked Aunt Agatha, in consternation.

"I am not sure it is all right," said Mary; "why has he gone to see Uncle Penrose? and what has he heard? and without saying a word to me."

Mary was angry with her boy, and it made her heart sore—it was the first time any of them had taken a sudden step out of her knowledge—and then what had he heard? Something worse than any simple offence or discontent might be lurking behind.

But Hugh, of course, knew nothing at all about that. He sat down again to his inter-

rupted breakfast, and laughed and talked, and made merry. "I wonder what Uncle Penrose will say to him?" said Hugh. "I suppose he has gone and spent all his money getting to Liverpool; and what could his motive be, odd fellow as he is? The girls are all married——"

"My dear boy, Will is not thinking of girls as you are," said Mary, beguiled into a smile.

Hugh laughed and grew red, and shook his abundant youthful locks. "We are not talking of what I think," he said; "and I suppose a man may do worse than think about girls—a little: but the question is, what was Will thinking about? Uncle Penrose cannot have ensnared him with his odious talk about money? By-the-way, I must send him some. We can't let an Ochterlony be worried about a few miserable shillings there."

"I don't think we can let an Ochterlony, at least so young a one as Will, stay uninvited," said Mary. "I feel much disposed to go after him and bring him home, or at least find out what he means."

"No, you shall do nothing of the kind," said Hugh, hastily. "I suppose our mother can trust her sons out of her sight. Nobody must go after him. Why, he is seventeen—almost

grown up. He must not feel any want of confidence——"

"Want of confidence!" said Aunt Agatha. "Hugh, you are only a boy yourself. What do you know about it? I think Mary would be very wrong if she let Will throw himself into temptation; and one knows there is every kind of temptation in those large, wicked towns," said Miss Seton, shuddering. It was she who knew nothing about it, no more than a baby, and still less did she know or guess the kind of temptation that was acting upon the truant's mind.

"If that were all," said Mary, slowly, and then she sighed. She was not afraid of the temptations of a great town. She did not even know what she feared. She wanted to bring back her boy, to hear from his own lips what his motive was. It did not seem possible that there could be any harm meant by his boyish secrecy. It was even hard for his mother to persuade herself that Will could think of any harm; but still it was strange. When she thought of Percival's visit and Will's expedition to Carlisle, her heart fluttered within her, though she scarcely knew why. Will was not like other boys of his age; and then it was "something he had heard." "I think," she said, with hesitation, "that one of us should go—either you or I——"

"No," said Hugh. "No, mother, no; don't think of it; as if he were a girl or a Frenchman! Why it's Will! What harm can he do? If he likes to visit Uncle Penrose, let him; it will not be such a wonderful delight. I'll send him some money to-day."

This, of course, was how it was settled; for Mary's terrors were not strong enough to contend with her natural English prejudices against *surveillance* and restraint, backed by Hugh's energetic remonstrances. When Winnie heard of it, she dashed immediately at the idea that her husband's influence had something to do with Will's strange flight, and was rather pleased and flattered by the thought. "I said he would strike me through my friends," she said to Aunt Agatha, who was bewildered, and did not know what this could mean.

"My dear love, what good could it do him to interfere with Will?" said Miss Seton. "A mere boy, and who has not a penny. If he had wanted to injure us, it would have been Hugh that he would have tried to lead away."

"To lead away?" said Winnie scornfully. "What does he care for leading away? He wants to do harm, real harm. He thinks he can strike me through my friends."

When Aunt Agatha heard this she turned

round to Mary, who had just come into the room, and gave a little deprecating shake of her head, and a pathetic look. Poor Winnie! She could think of nothing but her husband and his intentions; and how could he do this quiet household real harm? Mary said nothing, but her uneasiness increased more and more. She could not sit down to her work, or take up any of her ordinary occupations. She went to Will's room and examined it throughout, and looked through his wardrobe to see what he had taken with him, and searched vainly for any evidence of his meaning; and then she wrote him a long letter of questions and appeals, which would have been full of pathetic eloquence to anybody who knew what was in her mind, but would have appeared simply amazing and unintelligible to anybody ignorant of her history, as she herself perceived, and burnt it, and wrote a second, in which there was still a certain mystery. She reminded him that he might have gone away comfortably with everybody's knowledge, instead of making the household uneasy about him; and she could not but let a little wonder creep through, that of all people in the world it was Uncle Penrose whom he had elected to visit; and then she made an appeal to him: "What have I done to forfeit my boy's confidence? what can you have heard,

oh Will, my dear boy, that you could not tell to your mother?" Her mind was relieved by writing, but still she was uneasy and disquieted. If he had been severely kept in, or had any reason to fear a refusal;—but to steal away when he might have full leave and every facility; this was one of the things which appeared the most strange.

The servants, for their part, set it down to a quarrel with his brother, and jealousy about Nelly, and took Hugh's part, who was always the favourite. And as for Hugh himself, he sent his brother a cheque (his privilege of drawing cheques being still new, and very agreeable), and asked why he was such an ass as to run away, and bade him enjoy himself. The house was startled—but after all, it was no such great matter; and nobody except Mary wasted much consideration upon Will's escapade after that first morning. He was but a boy; and it was natural, everybody thought, that boys should do something foolish now and then.



CHAPTER VI.

IN a curious state of mind, Will was flying along towards Liverpool, while this commotion arose in the Cottage. Not even now had the matter taken any moral aspect to him. He did not feel that he had gone skulking off to deliver a cowardly blow. All that he was conscious of was the fact, that having something to tell which he could not somehow persuade himself to tell, he was going to make the communication from a distance under Uncle Penrose's advice. And yet the boy was not comfortable. It had become apparent to him vaguely, that after this communication was made, the relations existing between himself and his family must be changed. That his mother might be "angry," which was his boyish term for any or every displeasure that might cloud Mrs. Ochterlony's mind; that Hugh might take it badly—and that after all it was a

troublesome business, and he would be pleased to get it over. He was travelling in the cheapest way, for his money was scanty; but he was not the kind of boy to be beguiled from his own thoughts by the curious third-class society into which he was thus brought, or even by the country, which gradually widened and expanded under his eyes from the few beaten paths he knew so well, into that wide unknown stretch of hill and plain which was the world. A vague excitement, it is true, came into his mind as he felt himself to have passed out of the reach of everything he knew, and to have entered upon the undiscovered; but this excitement did not draw him out of his own thoughts. It did but mingle with them, and put a quickening thrill of life into the strange maze. The confused country people at the stations, who did not know which carriage to take, and wandered, hurried and disconsolate, on the platforms, looking into all—the long swift moment of passage over the silent country, in which the train, enveloped in its own noise, made for itself a distinct atmosphere—and then again a shriek, a pause, and another procession of faces looking in at the window—this was Will's idea of the long journey. He was not imaginative; but still everybody appeared to him hurried, and downcast, and pre-occupied.

Even the harmless country folks had the air of having something on their minds. And through all he kept on pondering what his mother and what Hugh would say. Poor boy ! his discovery had given him no advantage as yet; but it had put a cross upon his shoulders—it had bound him so hard and fast that he could not escape from it. It had brought, if not guilt, yet the punishment of guilt into all his thoughts.

Mr. Penrose had a handsome house at some distance from Liverpool, as was natural. And Will found it a very tedious and troublesome business to get there, not to speak of the calls for sixpences from omnibuses and porters, and everybody (he thought) who looked at him, which were very severe on his slender purse. And when he arrived, his uncle's servants looked upon him with manifest suspicion; he had never been there before, and Mr. Penrose was now living alone, his wife being dead, and all his children married, so that there was nobody in the house who could identify the unknown nephew. The Cottage was not much bigger than Mr. Penrose's porter's lodge, and yet that small tenement had looked down upon the great mansion all its life, and been partly ashamed of it, which sentiment gave Will an unconscious sense that he was doing Uncle Penrose an honour in going to visit him.

But when he was met at the door by the semi-polite suspicion of the butler, who proposed that he should call again, with an evident reference in his mind to the spoons, it gave the boy the forlornest feeling that can be conceived. He was alone, and they thought him an impostor, and nobody here knew or cared whether he was shut out from the house or not. His heart went back to his home with that revulsion which everybody knows. There, everybody would have rushed to open the door to him, and welcome him back; and though his errand here was simply to do that home as much injury as possible, his heart swelled at the contrast. While he stood, however, insisting upon admittance in his dogged way, without showing any feelings, it happened that Mr. Penrose drove up to the door, and hailed his nephew with much surprise. "You here, Will?" Mr. Penrose said. "I hope nothing has gone wrong at the Cottage?" and his man's hand instantly, and as by magic, relaxed from the door.

"There is nothing wrong, sir," said Will, "but I wanted to speak to you;" and he entered triumphantly, not without a sense of victory, as the subdued servant took his bag out of his hand. Mr. Penrose was, as we have said, alone. He had shed, as it were, all incumbrances, and was

ready, unfettered by any ties or prejudices, to grow richer and wiser and more enlightened every day. His children were all married, and his wife having fulfilled all natural offices of this life, and married all her daughters, had quietly taken her dismissal when her duties were over, and had a very handsome tombstone, which he looked at on Sunday. It occurred to very few people, however, to lament over Mr. Penrose's loneliness. He seemed to have been freed from all impediments, and left at liberty to grow rich, to get fat, and to believe in his own greatness and wisdom. Nor did it occur to himself to feel his great house lonely. He liked eating a luxurious dinner by himself, and knowing how much it had cost, all for his single lordly appetite—the total would have been less grand if wife and children had shared it. And then he had other things to think of—substantial things, about interest and investments, and not mere visionary reflections about the absence of other chairs or other faces at his table. But he had a natural interest in Wilfrid, as in a youth who had evidently come to ask his advice, which was an article he was not disinclined to give away. And then "the Setons," as he called his sister's family and descendants, had generally shut their ears to his advice, and shown an active absence of all po-

litical qualities, so that Will's visit was a compliment of the highest character, something like an unexpected act of homage from Mordecai in the gate.

But even Mr. Penrose was struck dumb by Will's communication. He put up his hand to his cravat and gasped, and thumped himself on the breast, staring at the boy with round, scared, apoplectic eyes—like the eyes of a boiled fish. He stared at Will,—who told the story calmly enough, with a matter-of-fact conciseness—and looked as if he was disposed to ring the bell and send for a doctor, and get out of the difficulty by concluding his nephew to be mad. But there was no withstanding the evidence of plain good faith and sincerity in Will's narration. Mr. Penrose remained silent longer than anybody had ever known him to remain silent before, and he was not even very coherent when he had regained the faculty of speech.

"That woman was present, was she?" he said, and Winnie's husband—good Lord! And so you mean to tell me Mary has been all this time—When I asked her to my house, and my wife intended to make a party for her, and all that—and when she preferred to visit at Earlston, and that old fool, Sir Edward, who never had a penny—except what he settled on Winnie

—and all that time, you know, Mary was—good Lord!"

"I don't see what difference it makes to my mother," said Will. "She is just what she always was—the difference it makes is to me—and of course to Hugh."

But this was not a view that Mr. Penrose could take, who knew more about the world than Will could be supposed to know—though his thoughts were usually so preoccupied by what he called the practical aspect of everything. Yet he was disturbed in this case by reflections which were almost imaginative, and which utterly amazed Will. He got up, though he was still in the middle of dessert, and walking about the room, making exclamations. "That's what she has been, you know, all this time—Mary, of all people in the world! Good Lord! That's what she was, when we asked her here." These were the exclamations that kept bursting from Uncle Penrose's amazed lips—and Will at last grew angry and impatient, and hurried into the practical matter on his own initiative.

"When you have made up your mind about it, Uncle, I should be glad to know what you think best to be done," said Will, in his steady way, and he looked at his adviser with those sceptical, clear-sighted eyes, which, more than

anything else, make a practical man ashamed of having indulged in any momentary aberration.

Mr. Penrose came back to his chair and sat down, and looked with respect, and something that was almost awe, in Will's face. Then the boy continued, seeing his advantage: "You must see what an important thing it is between Hugh and me," he said. "It is a matter of business, of course, and it would be far better to settle it at once. If I am the right heir, you know, Earlston ought to be mine. I have heard you say, feelings had nothing to do with the right and wrong."

"No," said Mr. Penrose, with a slight gasp; "that is quite true; but it is all so sudden, you know—and Mary—I don't know what you want me to do——"

"I want you to write and tell them about it," said Will.

Mr. Penrose put his lips into the shape they would naturally have taken had he been whistling as usual; but he was not capable of a whistle. "It is all very easy to talk," he said, "and naturally business is business, and I am not a man to think too much about feelings. But Mary—the fact is, it must be a matter of arrangement, Will. There can't be any trial, you know, or publicity to expose her——"

"I don't see that it would matter much to her," said Will. "She would not mind; it would only be one of her sons instead of the other, and I suppose she likes me the same as Hugh."

"I was not thinking of Hugh, or you either. I was thinking of your mother," said Mr. Penrose, thrusting his hands into the depths of his pockets, and staring with vacant eyes into the air before him. He was matter-of-fact himself, but he could not comprehend the obtuseness of ignorance and self-occupation and youth.

"Well?" said Will.

"Well," cried the uncle, turning upon him, "are you blind, or stupid, or what? Don't you see it never can come to publicity, or she will be disgraced? I dont say you are to give up your rights, if they are your rights, for that. I daresay you'll take a deal better care of everything than that fellow Hugh, and wont be so confounded saucy. But if you go and make a row about it in public, she can never hold up her head again, you know. I don't mind talk myself in a general way; but talk about a woman's marriage,—good Lord! There must be no public row, whatever you do."

"I don't see why there should be any public

row," said Will; "all that has to be done is to let them know."

"I suppose you think Hugh will take it quite comfortable," said Mr. Penrose, "and lay down everything like a lamb. He's not a business man, nor good for much; but he will never be such an idiot as that; and then you would need to have your witnesses very distinct, if it was to come to anything. He has possession in his favour, and that is a good deal, and it is you who would have to prove everything. Are you quite sure that your witnesses would be forthcoming, and that you could make the case clear?"

"I don't know about making the case clear," said Will, who began to get confused; "all I know is what I have told you. Percival was there, and Mrs. Kirkman—they saw it, you know—and she says Hugh himself was there. Of course he was only a child. But she said no doubt he would remember, if it was brought to his mind."

"Hugh himself!" said Mr. Penrose—again a little startled, though he was not a person of fine feelings. The idea of appealing to the recollection of the child for evidence against the man's rights, struck him as curious at least. He was staggered, though he felt that he ought to have been above that. Of course it was all perfectly

just and correct, and nobody could have been more clear than he, that any sort of fantastic delicacy coming between a man and his rights would be too absurd to be thought of. And yet it cannot be denied that he was staggered in spite of himself.

"I think if you told him distinctly, and recalled it to his recollection, and he knew everything that was involved," said Will, with calm distinctness, "that Hugh would give in. It is the only thing he could do; and I should not say anything to him about a younger brother's portion, or two thousand pounds," the lad added, kindling up. "He should have everything that the money or the estate could do for him—whatever was best for him, if it cost half or double what Earlston was worth."

"Then why on earth don't you leave him Earlston, if you are so generous?" said Mr. Penrose. "If you are to spend it all upon him, what good would it do you having the dreary old place?"

"I should have my rights," said Will with solemnity. It was as if he had been a disin-
ed prince whom some usurper had deprived
kingdom; and this strange assumption was
est in its way, and had such an appearance
ncerity, that Mr. Penrose was struck dumb,

and gazed at the boy with a consternation which he could not express. His rights! Mary's youngest son, whom everybody, up to this moment, had thought of only as a clever, not very amiable boy, of no particular account anywhere. The merchant began to wake up to the consciousness that he had a phenomenon before him— a new development of man. As he recovered from his surprise, he began to appreciate Will— to do justice to the straightforward ardour of his determination that business was business, and that feelings had nothing to do with it; and to admire his calm impassibility to every other view of the case but that which concerned himself. Mr. Penrose thought it was the result of a great preconcerted plan, and began to awake into admiration and respect. He thought the solemnity, and the calm, and that beautiful confidence in his rights, were features of a subtle and precocious scheme which Will had made for himself; and his thoughts, which had been dwelling for the moment on Mary, with a kind of unreflective sympathy, turned towards the nobler object thus presented before him. Here was a true apotheosis of interest over nature. Here was such a man of business, heaven-born, as had never been seen before. Mr. Penrose warmed and kindled into admiration, and he

made a secret vow that such a genius should not be lost.

As for Will, he never dreamt of speculating as to what were his uncle's thoughts. He was quite content that he had told his own tale, and so got over the first preliminary difficulty of getting it told to those whom it most concerned; and he was very sleepy—dreadfully tired, and more anxious to curl up his poor, young, weary head under his wing, and get to bed, than for anything else in the world. Yet, notwithstanding, when he laid down, and had put out his light, and had begun to doze, the thought came over him that he saw the glow of his mother's candle shining in under his door, and heard her step on the stairs, which had been such a comfort to him many a night when he was a child, and woke up in the dark and heard her pass, and knew her to be awake and watching, and was not even without a hope that she might come in and stand for a moment, driving away all ghosts and terrors of the night, by his bed. He thought he saw the light under his door, and heard the foot coming up the stairs. And so probably he did: but the poor boy woke right up under this fancy, and remembered with a compunction that he was far away from his mother, and that probably she was "angry," and

perhaps anxious about his sudden departure; and he was very sorry in his heart to have come away so, and never to have told her. But he was not sorry nor much troubled anyhow about the much more important thing he was about to do.

And Uncle Penrose, under the strange stimulus of his visitor's earnestness, addressed himself to the task required of him, and wrote to Hugh. He, too, thought first of writing to Mrs. Ochterlony; but, excellent business man as he was, he could not do it; it went against his heart, if he had a heart,—or, if not his heart, against some digestive organ which served him instead of that useful but not indispensable part of the human frame. But he did write to Hugh—that was easier; and then Hugh had been "confounded saucy," and had rejected his advice, not about the Museum only, but in other respects. Mr Penrose wrote the letter that very night while Will was dreaming about his mother's light and so the great wheel was set a-going, which none of them could then stop for ever.



CHAPTER VII.

HUGH had left the Cottage the day after Will's departure. He had gone to Earlston, where a good deal of business about the Museum and the estate awaited him; and he had gone off without any particular burden on his mind. As for Will's flight from home, it was odd, no doubt; but then Will himself was odd, and out-of-the-way acts were to be expected from him. When Hugh, with careless liberality, had sent him the cheque, he dismissed the subject from his mind—at least, he thought of his younger brother only with amusement, wondering what he could find to attract him in Uncle Penrose's prosaic house,—trying to form an imagination of Will wandering about the great Liverpool docks, looking at the big ships, and all the noisy traffic; and Hugh laughed within himself to think how very much all that was out of Will's

way. No doubt he would come home in a day or two bored to death, and would loathe the very name of Liverpool all his life thereafter. As for Mr. Ochterlony of Earlston himself, he had a great deal to do. The mayor and corporation of Dalken had come to a final decision about the Museum, and all that had to be done was to prepare the rooms which were to receive Francis Ochterlony's treasures, and to transfer with due tenderness and solemnity the Venus and the Psyche, and all the delicate wealth which had been so dear to the heart of "the old Squire." The young Squire went round and looked at them all, with a great tenderness in his own, remembering his uncle's last progress among them, and where he sat down to rest, and the wistful looks he had given to those marble white creations which stood to him in the place of wife and children; and the pathetic humour with which he had said, "It is all the better for *you*." It was the better for Hugh; but still the young man in the fulness of his hopes had a tender compunction for the old man who had died without getting the good of his life, and with no treasures but marble and bronze and gold and silver to leave behind him. "My poor uncle!" Hugh said; and yet the chances were that Francis Ochterlony was not,

either in living or dying, sorry for himself. Hugh had a kind of reluctance to change the aspect of everything, and make the house his own house, and not Francis Ochterlony's. It seemed almost impious to take from it the character it had borne so long, and at the same time it was his uncle's wish. These were Hugh's thoughts at night, but in the fresh light of the morning it would be wrong to deny that another set of ideas took possession of his mind. Then he began to think of the new aspect, and the changes he could make. It was not bright enough for a home for—well, for any lady that might happen to come on a visit or otherwise; and, to be sure, Hugh had no intention of accepting as final his mother's determination not to leave the Cottage. He made up his mind that she would come, and that people—various people, ladies and others—would come to visit her: that there should be flowers and music and smiles about the place, and perhaps some one as fair and as sweet as Psyche to change the marble moonlight into sacred living sunshine. Now the fact was, that Nelly was not by any means so fair as Psyche—that she was not indeed what you would call a regular beauty at all, but only a fresh, faulty, sweet little human creature, with warm blood in her veins, and a

great many thoughts in her little head. And when Hugh thought of some fair presence coming into these rooms and making a Paradise of them, either it was not Nelly Askell he was thinking of, or else he was thinking like a poet—though he was not poetical, to speak of. However, he did not himself give any name to his imaginations—he could afford to be vague. He went all over the house in the morning, not with the regretful, affectionate eye with which he made the same survey the night before, but in a practical spirit. At his age, and in his position, the practical was only a pleasanter variation of the romantic aspect of affairs. As he thought of new furniture, scores of little pictures flashed into his mind—though in ordinary cases he was not distinguished by a powerful imagination. He had no sooner devised the kind of chair that should stand in a particular corner, than straightway a little figure jumped into it, a whisper of talk came out of it, with a host of imaginary circumstances which had nothing to do with upholstery. Even the famous rococo chair which Islay had broken was taken possession of by that vague, sweet phantom. And he went about the rooms with an unconscious smile on his face, devising and planning. He did not know he was smiling; it was not *at* anything or about anything.

It was but the natural expression of the fresh morning fancies and sweet stir of everything hopeful, and bright, and uncertain, which was in his heart.

And when he went out of doors he still smiled. Earlston was a grey limestone house, as has been described in the earlier part of this history. A house which chilled Mrs. Ochterlony to the heart when she went there with her little children in the first forlornness of her widowhood. What Hugh had to do now was to plan a flower-garden for—his mother; yes, it was truly for his mother. He meant that she should come all the same. Nothing could make any difference so far as she was concerned. But at the same time, to be sure, he did not mean that his house should make the same impression on any other stranger as that house had made upon Mary. He planned how the great hedges should be cut down, and the trees thinned, and the little moorland burn should be taken in within the enclosure, and followed to its very edge by the gay lawn with its flower-beds. He planned a different approach—where there might be openings in the dark shrubberies, and views over the hills. All this he did in the morning, with a smile on his face, though the tears had been in his eyes at the thought of any change only the previous

night. If Francis Ochterlony had been by, as perhaps he was, no doubt he would have smiled at that tender inconsistency—and there would not have been any bitterness in the smile.

And then Hugh went in to breakfast. He had already some new leases to sign and other business matters to do, and he was quite pleased to do it—as pleased as he had been to draw his first cheques. He sat down at his breakfast-table, before the little pile of letters that awaited him, and felt the importance of his new position. Even his loneliness made him feel its importance the more. Here were questions of all sorts submitted to him, and it was he who had to answer, without reference to anybody—he whose advice a little while ago nobody would have taken the trouble to ask. It was not that he cared to exercise his privilege—for Hugh, on the whole, had an inclination to be advised—but still the sense of his independence was sweet. He meant to ask Mr. Preston, the attorney, about various things, and he meant to consult his mother, and to lay some special affairs before Sir Edward—but still, at the same time, it was he who had everything to do, and Mr. Ochterlony of Earlston sat down before his letters with a sense of satisfaction which does not always attend the mature mind in that moment of trial. One of the up-

permost was from Uncle Penrose, redirected from the Cottage, but it did not cause any thrill of interest to Hugh's mind, who put it aside calmly, knowing of no thunderbolts that might be in it. No doubt it was some nonsense about the Museum, he thought, as if he himself was not a much better judge about the Museum than a stranger and business-man could be. There was, however, a letter from Mary, which directed her son's attention to this epistle. "I send you a letter directed in Uncle Penrose's hand," wrote Mrs. Ochterlony, "which I have had the greatest inclination to open, to see what he says about Will. I daresay you would not have minded; but I conclude, on the whole, that Mr. Ochterlony of Earlston should have his letters to himself; so I send it on to you uninvaded. Let me know what he says about your brother." Hugh could not but laugh when he read this, half with pleasure, half with amusement. His mother's estimate of his importance entertained him greatly, and the idea of anything private being in Uncle Penrose's letter tickled him still more. Then he drew it towards him lightly, and began to read it with eyes running over with laughter. He was all alone, and there was nobody to see any change of sentiment in his face.

He was all alone—but yet presently Hugh

raised his eyes from the letter which he had taken up so gaily, and cast a scared look round him, as if to make sure that nobody was there. The smile had gone off his face, and the laughter out of his eyes,—and not only that, but every particle of colour had left his face. And yet he did not see the meaning of what he had read. "Will!" he said to himself. "Will!" He was horror-stricken and bewildered, but that was the sole idea it conveyed to him—a sense of treachery—the awful feeling of unreality and darkness round about, with which the young soul for the first time sees itself injured and betrayed. He laid down the letter half read, and paused, and put up his hands to his head as if to convince himself that he was not dreaming. Will! Good God! Will! Was it possible? Hugh had to make a convulsive effort to grasp this unnatural horror. Will, one of themselves, to have gone off, and put himself into the hands of Uncle Penrose, and set himself against his mother and her sons! The ground seemed to fail under his feet, the solid world to fall off round him into bewildering mystery. Will! And yet he did not apprehend what it was. His mind could not take in more than one discovery at a time. A minute before, and he was ready to have risked everything on the good

faith of any and every human creature he knew. Now, was there anybody to be trusted? His brother had stolen from his side, and was striking at him by another and an unfriendly hand. Will! Good heavens, Will!

It would be difficult to tell how long it was before the full meaning of the letter he had thus received entered into Hugh's mind. He sat with the breakfast things still on the table so long, that the housekeeper herself came at last with natural inquisitiveness to see if anything was the matter, and found Hugh with a face as grey and colourless as that of the old Squire, sitting over his untasted coffee, unaware, apparently, what he was about. He started when she came in, and bundled up his letters into his pocket, and gave an odd laugh, and said he had been busy, and had forgotten. And then he sprang up and left the room, paying no attention to her outcry that he had eaten nothing. Hugh was not aware he had eaten nothing, or probably in the first horror of his discovery of the treachery in the world, he too would have taken to false pretences and saved appearances, and made believe to have breakfasted. But the poor boy was unaware, and rushed off to the library, where nobody could have any pretext for disturbing him, and shut himself up with

this first secret—the new, horrible discovery which had changed the face of the world. This was the letter which he had crushed up in his hand as he might have crushed a snake or deadly reptile, but which nothing could crush out of his heart, where the sting had entered and gone deep:—

"MY DEAR NEPHEW,—It is with pain that I write to you, though it is my clear duty to do so in the interests of your brother, who has just put his case into my hands—and I don't doubt that the intelligence I am about to convey will be a great blow, not only to your future prospects but to your pride and sense of importance, which so fine a position at your age had naturally elevated considerably higher than a plain man like myself could approve of. Your brother arrived here to-day, and has lost no time in informing me of the singular circumstances under which he left home, and of which, so far as I understand him, you and your mother are still in ignorance. Wilfrid's perception of the fact that feelings, however creditable to him as an individual, ought not to stand in the way of what is, strictly speaking, a matter of business, is very clear and uncompromising; but still he does not deny that he felt it difficult to make this commu-

nication either to you or to his mother. Accident, the nature of which I do not at present, before knowing your probable course of action, feel myself at liberty to indicate more plainly, has put him in possession of certain facts, which would change altogether the relations between him and yourself, as well as your (apparent) position as head of the family. These facts, which, for your mother's sake, I should be deeply grieved to make known out of the family, are as follows: your father, Major Ochterlony, and my niece, instead of being married privately in Scotland, as we all believed, in the year 1830, or thereabouts—I forget the exact date—were in reality only married in India in the year 1837, by the chaplain, the Rev.—— Churchill, then officiating at the station where your father's regiment was. This, as you are aware, was shortly before Wilfrid's birth, and not long before Major Ochterlony died. It is subject of thankfulness that your father did my niece this tardy justice before he was cut off, as may be said, in the flower of his days, but you will see at a glance that it entirely reverses your respective positions—and that in fact Wilfrid is Major Ochterlony's only lawful son.

"I am as anxious as you can be that this should be made a matter of family arrangement, and

should never come to the public ears. To satisfy your own mind, however, of the perfect truth of the assertion I have made, I beg to refer you to the Rev. Mr. Churchill, who performed the ceremony, and whose present address, which Wilfrid had the good sense to secure, you will find below—and to Mrs. Kirkman, who was present. Indeed, I am informed that you yourself were present—though probably too young to understand what it meant. It is possible that on examining your memory you may find some trace of the occurrence, which though not dependable upon by itself, will help to confirm the intelligence to your mind. We are in no hurry, and will leave you the fullest time to satisfy yourself, as well as second you in every effort to prevent any painful consequence from falling upon your mother, who has (though falsely) enjoyed the confidence and esteem of her friends so long.

"For yourself you may reckon upon Wilfrid's anxious endeavours to further your prospects by every means in his power. Of course I do not expect you to take a fact involving so much, either upon his word or mine. Examine it fully for yourself, and the more entirely the matter is cleared up, the more will it be for our satisfaction, as well as your own. The only thing I have to desire for my own part is that you will spare

your mother—as your brother is most anxious to do. Hoping for an early reply,

"I am,

"Your affectionate uncle and sincere friend,

"J. P. Penrose."

Hugh sat in Francis Ochterlony's chair, at his table, with his head supported on his hands, looking straight before him, seeing nothing, not even thinking, feeling only this letter spread out upon the table, and the intelligence conveyed in it, and holding his head, which ached and throbbed with the blow, in his hands. He was still, and his head throbbed and his heart and soul ached, tingling through him to every joint and every vein. He could not even wonder, nor doubt, nor question in any way, for the first terrible interval. All he could do was to look at the fact and take it fully into his mind, and turn it over and over, seeing it all round on every side, looking at it this way and that way, and feeling as if somehow heaven and earth were filled with it, though he had never dreamt of such a ghost until that hour. Not his, after all—nor Earlston, nor his name, nor the position he had been so proud of; nothing his—alas, not even his mother, his spotless mother, the woman whom it had been an honour and glory to come from

and belong to. When a groan came from the poor boy's white lips it was that he was thinking of. Madonna Mary! that was the name they had called her by—and this was how it really was. He groaned aloud, and made an unconscious outcry of his pain when it came to that. "Oh, my God, if it had only been ruin, loss of everything—anything in the world but that!" This was the first stage of stupefaction and yet of vivid consciousness, before the indignation came. He sat and looked at it, and realized it, and took it into his mind, staring at it until every drop of blood ebbed away from his face. This was how it was before the anger came. After a while his countenance and his mood changed—the colour and heat came rushing back to his cheeks and lips, and a flood of rage and resentment swept over him like a sudden storm. Will! could it be Will? Liar! coward! traitor! to call her mother, and to tax her with shame even had it been true—to frame such a lying, cursed, devilish accusation against her! Then it was that Hugh flashed into a fiery, burning shame to think that he had given credence to it for one sole moment. He turned his eyes upon her, as it were, and looked into her face and glowed with a bitter indignation and fury. His mother's face! only to think of it and dare to fancy that

shame could ever have been there. And then the boy wept, in spite of his manhood—wept a few, hot, stinging tears, that dried up the moment they fell, half for rage, half for tenderness.—And, oh, my God, was it Will? Then as his mind roused more and more to the dread emergency, Hugh got up and went to the window and gazed out, as if that would help him; and his eye lighted on the tangled thicket which he had meant to make into his mother's flower-garden, and upon the sweep of trees through which he had planned his new approach, and once more he groaned aloud. Only this morning so sure about it all, so confidently and carelessly happy—now with not one clear step before him to take, with no future, no past that he could dare look back upon—no name, nor rights of any kind—if this were true. And could it be otherwise than true? Could any imagination frame so monstrous and inconceivable a falsehood?—such a horrible impossibility might be fact, but it was beyond all the bounds of fancy;—and then the blackness of darkness descended again upon Hugh's soul. Poor Mary, poor mother! It came into the young man's mind to go to her and take her in his arms, and carry her away somewhere out of sight of men and sound of their voices—and again there came to his eyes those stinging tears.

Fault of hers it could not be; she might have been deceived; and then poor Hugh's lips, unaccustomed to curses, quivered and stopped short as they were about to curse the father whom he never knew. Here was the point at which the tide turned again. Could it be Hugh Ochterlony who had deceived his wife? he whose sword hung in Mary's room, whose very name made a certain music in her voice when she pronounced it, and whom she had trained her children to reverence with that surpassing honour which belongs to the dead alone. Again a storm of rage and bitter indignation swept in his despair and bewilderment over the young man's mind; an accursed scheme, a devilish, hateful lie—that was how it was: and oh, horror! that it should be Will.

Through all these changes it was one confused tempest of misery and dismay that was in Hugh's mind. Now and then there would be wild breaks in the clouds—now they would he whirled over the sky in gusts—now settled down into a blackness beyond all reckoning. Lives change from joy to misery often enough in this world; but seldom thus in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. His careless boat had been taking its sweet course over waters rippled with a favourable breeze, and without a moment's interval it was among the breakers; and he knew so little how

to manage it, he was so inexperienced to cope with winds and waves. And he had nobody to ask counsel from. He was, as Will had been, separated from his natural adviser, the one friend to whom hitherto he had confided all his difficulties. But Hugh was older than Will, and his mind had come to a higher development, though perhaps he was not so clever as his brother. He had no Uncle Penrose to go to; no living soul would hear from him this terrible tale; he could consult nobody. Not for a hundred Earlstons, not for all the world, would he have discussed with any man in existence his mother's good name.

Yet with that, too, there came another complication into Hugh's mind. Even while he actually thought in his despair of going to his mother, and telling her any tender lie that might occur to him, and carrying her away to Australia, or any end of the world where he could work for her, and remove her for ever from shame and pain, a sense of outraged justice and rights assailed was in his mind. He was not one of those who can throw down their arms. Earlston was his, and he could not relinquish it and his position as head of the house without a struggle. And the thought of Mr. Penrose stung him. He even tried to heal one of his deeper wounds by persuading

himself that Uncle Penrose was at the bottom of it, and that poor Will was but his tool. Poor Will! Poor miserable boy! And if he ever woke and came to himself, and knew what he had been doing, how terrible would his position be! Thus Hugh tried to think till, wearied out with thinking, he said to himself that he would put it aside and think no more of it, and attend to his business; which vain imagination the poor boy tried to carry out with hands that shook and brain that refused to obey his guidance. And all this change was made in one little moment. His life came to a climax, and passed through a secret revolution in that one day; and yet he had begun it as if it had been an ordinary day—a calm summer morning in the summer of his days.

This was what Hugh said to his mother of Mr. Penrose's letter:—"The letter you forwarded to me from Uncle Penrose was in his usual business strain—good advice, and that sort of thing. He does not say much about Will; but he has arrived all safe, and I suppose is enjoying himself—as well as he can, there."

And when he had written and despatched that note he sat down to think again. He decided at last that he would not go on with the flower-garden and the other works—till he saw; but

that he would settle about the Museum without any delay. "If it came to the worst they would not recall the gift," he said to himself, brushing his hand across his eyes. It was his uncle's wish; and it was he, Hugh, and not any other, whom Francis Ochterlony had wished for his heir. Hugh's hand was wet when he took it from his eyes, and his heart was full, and he could have wept like a child. But he was a man, and weeping could do no good; and he had nobody in the world to take his trouble to—nobody in the world. Love and pride made a fence round him, and isolated him. He had to make his way out of it as best he could, and alone. He made a great cry to God in his trouble; but from nobody in the world could he have either help or hope. And he read the letter over and over, and tried to recollect and to go back into his dim baby-memory of India, and gather out of the thick mists that scene which they said he had been present at. Was there really some kind of vague image of it, all broken and indistinct and effaced, on his mind?



CHAPTER VIII.

WHILE all this was going on at Earlston, there were other people in whose minds, though the matter was not of importance so overwhelming, pain and excitement and a trembling dread of the consequences had been awakened. Mary, to whom it would be even more momentous than to Hugh, knew nothing of it as yet. She had taken Mr. Penrose's letter into her hand and looked at it, and hesitated, and then had smiled at her boy's new position in the world, and redirected it to him, passing on as it were a living shell just ready to explode without so much as scorching her own delicate fingers. But Mrs. Kirkman felt herself in the position of a woman who had seen the shell fired and had even touched the fatal trigger, and did not know where it had fallen, nor what death and destruction it might have scattered around. She was not like her-

self for these two or three days. She gave a divided attention to her evangelical efforts, and her mind wandered from the reports of her Bible readers. She seemed to see the great mass of fire and flame striking the ground, and the dead and wounded lying around it in all directions; and it might be that she too was to blame. She bore it as long as she could, trying to persuade herself that she, like Providence, had done it "for the best," and that it might be for Mary's good or Hugh's good, even if it should happen to kill them. This was how she attempted to support and fortify herself; but while she was doing so Wilfrid's steady, matter-of-fact countenance would come before her, and she would perceive by the instinct of guilt, that he would neither hesitate nor spare, but was clothed in the double armour of egotism and ignorance; that he did not know what horrible harm he could do, and yet that he was sensible of his power and would certainly exercise it. She was like the other people involved—afraid to ask any one's advice, or betray the share she had taken in the business; even her husband, had she spoken to him about it, would probably have asked, what the deuce she had to do interfering? For Colonel Kirkman, though a man of very orthodox views, still was liable in a moment of excitement to

forget himself, and give force to his sentiments by a mild oath. Mrs. Kirkman could not bear thus to descend in the opinion of any one, and yet she could not satisfy her conscience about it, nor be content with what she had done. She stood out bravely for a few days, telling herself she had only done her duty; but the composure she attained by this means was forced and unnatural. And at last she could bear it no longer; she seemed to have heard the dreadful report, and then to have seen everything relapse into the most deadly silence; no cry coming out of the distance, nor indications if everybody was perishing, or any one had escaped. If she had but heard one outcry—if Hugh, poor fellow, had come storming to her to know the truth of it, or Mary had come with her fresh wounds, crying out against her, Mrs. Kirkman could have borne it; but the silence was more than she could bear. Something within compelled her to get up out of her quiet and go forth and ask who had been killed, even though she might bring herself within the circle of responsibility thereby.

This was why, after she had put up with her anxiety as long as she could, she went out at last by herself in a very disturbed and uneasy state to the Cottage, where all was still peaceful, and no storm had yet darkened the skies. Mary had

received Hugh's letter that morning, which he had written in the midst of his first misery, and it had never occurred to her to think anything more about Uncle Penrose after the calm mention her boy made of his letter. She had not heard from Will, it is true, and was vexed by his silence; but yet it was a light vexation. Mrs. Ochterlony, however, was not at home when Mrs. Kirkman arrived; and, if anything could have increased her uneasiness and embarrassment it would have been to be ushered into the drawing-room, and to find Winnie seated there all by herself. Mrs. Percival rose in resentful grandeur when she saw who the visitor was. Now was Winnie's chance to repay that little demonstration of disapproval which the Colonel's wife had made on her last visit to the Cottage. The two ladies made very stately salutations to each other, and the stranger sat down, and then there was a dead pause. "Let Mrs. Ochterlony know when she comes in," Winnie had said to the maid; and that was all she thought it necessary to say. Even Aunt Agatha was not near to break the violence of the encounter. Mrs. Kirkman sat down in a very uncomfortable condition, full of genuine anxiety; but it was not to be expected that her natural impulses should entirely yield even to compunction and fright, and a sense of

guilt. When a few minutes of silence had elapsed, and Mary did not appear, and Winnie sat opposite to her, wrapt up and gloomy, in her shawl, and her haughtiest air of preoccupation, Mrs. Kirkman began to come to herself. Here was a perishing sinner before her, to whom advice, and reproof, and admonition, might be all important, and such a favourable moment might never come again. The very sense of being rather faulty in her own person gave her a certain stimulus to warn the culpable creature, whose errors were so different, and so much more flagrant than hers. And if in doing her duty, she had perhaps done something that might harm one of the family, was it not all the more desirable to do good to another? Mrs. Kirkman cleared her throat, and looked at the culprit. And as she perceived Winnie's look of defiance, and absorbed self-occupation, and determined opposition to anything that might be advanced, a soft sense of superiority and pity stole into her mind. Poor thing, that did not know the things that belonged to her peace!—was it not a Christian act to bring them before her ere they might be for ever hid from her eyes?

Once more Mrs. Kirkman cleared her throat. She did it with an intention; and Winnie heard,

[illegible]

"[illegible] is probably [illegible] among the poor," said Mrs. Kirkman, [illegible] with a [illegible] in her voice [illegible] I [illegible] [illegible] she was [illegible] might it be [illegible] I was doubtful whether she was so well employed.

"Probably," said Winnie, curtly; and there was a pause.

"[illegible] who occupies herself so much as she does with her family, there must be much [illegible] for their souls," continued Mrs. Kirkman, [illegible] with a certain pathos in her voice. "Ah! if we did not give ourselves as much trouble about our spiritual state!"

She waited for a reply, but Winnie gave no reply. She even gave a slight, scarcely perceptible, shrug to her shoulders, and turned a little aside.

"Which is, after all, the only thing that is of any importance," said Mrs. Kirkman. "My dear Mrs. Percival, I do trust that you agree with me?"

"I don't see why I should be your dear Mrs.

Percival," said Winnie. "I was not aware that we knew each other. I think you must be making a mistake."

"All my fellow-creatures are dear to me," said Mrs. Kirkman, "especially when I can hope that their hearts are open to grace. I can be making no mistake so long as I am addressing a fellow-sinner. We have all so much reason to abase ourselves, and repent in dust and ashes! Even when we have been preserved more than others from active sin, we must know that the root of all evil is in our hearts."

Winnie gave another very slight shrug of her shoulders, and turned away, as far as a mingled impulse of defiance and politeness would let her. She would neither be rude nor would she permit her assailant to think that she was running away.

"If I venture to seize this moment, and speak to you more plainly than I would speak to all, oh, my dear Mrs. Percival," cried Mrs. Kirkman, "my dear fellow-sinner! don't think it is because I am insensible to the existence of the same evil tendency in my own heart."

"What do you mean by talking to me of evil tendencies?" cried Winnie, flushing high. "I don't want to hear you speak. You may be a sinner if you like, but I don't think there is

any particular fellowship between you and me."

"There is the fellowship of sinning hearts," said Mrs. Kirkman. "I hope, for your own sake, you will not refuse to listen for a moment. I may never have been tempted in the same way, but I know too well the deceitfulness of the natural heart to take any credit to myself. You have been exposed to many temptations——"

"You know nothing about me, that I am aware," cried Winnie, with restrained fury. "I do not know how you can venture to take such a liberty with me."

"Ah, my dear Mrs. Percival, I know a great deal about you," said Mrs. Kirkman. "There is nothing I would not do to make a favourable impression on your mind. If you would but treat me as a friend, and let me be of some use to you: I know you must have had many temptations; but we know also that it is never too late to turn away from evil, and that with true repentance——"

"I suppose what you want is to drive me out of the room," said Winnie, looking at her fiercely, with crimson cheeks. "What right have you to lecture me? My sister's friends have a right to visit her, of course, but not to make themselves disagreeable—and I don't

mean my private affairs to be discussed by Mary's friends. You have nothing to do with me."

"I was not speaking as Mary's friend," said Mrs. Kirkman, with a passing twinge of conscience. "I was speaking only as a fellow-sinner. Dear Mrs. Percival, surely you recollect who it was that objected to be his brother's keeper. It was Cain; it was not a loving Christian heart. Oh, don't sin against opportunity, and refuse to hear me. The message I have is one of mercy and love. Even if it were too late to redeem character with the world, it is never too late to come to——"

Winnie started to her feet, goaded beyond bearing.

"How dare you! how dare you!" she said, clenching her hands,—but Mrs. Kirkman's benevolent purpose was far too lofty and earnest to be put down by any such demonstration of womanish fury.

"If it were to win you to think in time, to withdraw from the evil and seek good, to come while it is called to-day," said the Evangelist, with much steadfastness, "I would not mind even making you angry. I can dare anything in my Master's service—oh, do not refuse the gracious message! Oh, do not turn a deaf ear.

You may have forfeited this world, but, oh think of the next; as a Christian and a fellow-sinner——"

"Aunt Agatha!" cried Winnie, breathless with rage and shame, "do you mean to let me be insulted in your house?"

Poor Aunt Agatha had just come in, and knew nothing about Mrs. Kirkman and her visit. She stood at the door surprised, looking at Winnie's excited face, and at the stranger's authoritative calm. She had been out in the village, with a little basket in her hand, which never went empty, and she also had been dropping words of admonition out of her soft and tender lips.

"Insulted! My dear love, it must be some mistake," said Aunt Agatha. "We are always very glad to see Mrs. Kirkman, as Mary's friend; but the house is Mrs. Percival's house, being mine," Miss Seton added, with a little dignified curtsey, thinking the visitor had been uncivil, as on a former occasion. And then there was a pause, and Winnie sat down, fortifying herself by the presence of the mild little woman who was her protector. It was a strange reversal of positions, but yet that was how it was. The passionate creature had now no other protector but Aunt Agatha, and even while she felt herself assured

and strengthened by her presence, it gave her a pang to think it was so. Nobody but Aunt Agatha to stand between her and impertinent intrusion—nobody to take her part before the world. That was the moment when Winnie's heart melted, if it ever did melt, for one pulsation and no more, towards her enemy, her antagonist, her husband, who was not there to take advantage of the momentary thaw.

"I am Mary's friend," said Mrs. Kirkman, sweetly; "and I am all your friends. It was not only as Mary's friend I was speaking—it was out of love for souls. Oh, my dear Miss Seton, I hope you are one of those who think seriously of life. Help me to talk to your dear niece; help me to tell her that there is still time. She has gone astray; perhaps she never can retrieve herself for this world,—but this world is not all,—and she is still in the land of the living, and in the place of hope. Oh, if she would but give up her evil ways and flee! Oh, if she would but remember that there is mercy for the vilest!"

Speaker and hearers were by this time wound up to such a pitch of excitement, that it was impossible to go on. Mrs. Kirkman had tears in her eyes—tears of real feeling; for she thought she was doing what she ought to do; while

Winnie blazed upon her with rage and defiance, and poor Aunt Agatha stood up in horror and consternation between them, horrified by the entire breach of all ordinary rules, and yet driven to bay and roused to that natural defence of her own which makes the weakest creature brave.

"My dear love, be composed," she said, trembling a little. "Mrs. Kirkman, perhaps you don't know that you are speaking in a very extraordinary way. We are all great sinners; but as for my dear niece, Winnie——My darling, perhaps if you were to go upstairs to your own room, that would be best——"

"I have no intention of going to my own room," said Winnie. "The question is, whether you will suffer me to be insulted here?"

"Oh, that there should be any thought of insult!" said Mrs. Kirkman, shaking her head, and waving her long curls solemnly. "If any one is to leave the room, perhaps it should be me. If my warning is rejected, I will shake off the dust of my feet, and go away, as commanded. But I did hope better things. What motive have I but love of her poor soul? Oh, if she would think while it is called to-day—while there is still a place of repentance——"

"Winnie, my dear love," said Aunt Agatha,

trembling more and more, "go to your own room."

But Winnie did not move. It was not in her to run away. Now that she had an audience to fortify her, she could sit and face her assailant, and defy all attacks;—though at the same time her eyes and cheeks blazed, and the thought that it was only Aunt Agatha whom she had to stand up for her, filled her with furious contempt and bitterness. At length it was Mrs. Kirkman who rose up with sad solemnity, and drew her silk robe about her, and shook the dust, if there was any dust, not from her feet, but from the fringes of her handsome shawl.

"I will ask the maid to show me up to Mary's room," she said, with pathetic resignation. "I suppose I may wait for her there; and I hope it may never be recorded against you that you have rejected a word of Christian warning. Good-by, Miss Seton; I hope you will be faithful to your poor dear niece yourself, though you will not permit me."

"We know our own affairs best," said Aunt Agatha, whose nerves were so affected that she could scarcely keep up to what she considered a correct standard of polite calm.

"Alas, I hope it may not prove to be just our own best interests that we are most ignorant of,"

said Mrs. Kirkman, with a heavy sigh—and she swept out of the room following the maid, who looked amazed and aghast at the strange request. "Show me to Mrs. Ochterlony's room, and kindly let her know when she comes in that I am there."

As for Winnie, she burst into an abrupt laugh when her monitress was gone—a laugh which wounded Aunt Agatha, and jarred upon her excited nerves. But there was little mirth in it. It was, in its way, a cry of pain, and it was followed by a tempest of hot tears, which Miss Seton took for hysterics. Poor Winnie! she was not penitent, nor moved by anything that had been said to her, except to rage and a sharper sense of pain. But yet, such an attack made her feel her position, as she did not do when left to herself. She had no protector but Aunt Agatha. She was open to all the assaults of well-meaning friends, and social critics of every description. She was not placed above comment as a woman is who keeps her troubles to herself—for she had taken the world in general into her confidence, as it were, and opened their mouths, and subjected herself voluntarily to their criticism. Winnie's heart seemed to close up as she pondered this—and her life rose up before her, wilful and warlike—and all at once it came into her

head what her sister had said to her long ago, and her own decision: were it for misery, were it for ruin, rather to choose ruin and misery with *him*, than peace without him? How strange it was to think of the change that time had made in everything. She had been fighting him, and making him her chief antagonist, almost ever since. And yet, down in the depths of her heart poor Winnie remembered Mary's words, and felt with a curious pang, made up of misery and sweetness, that even yet, even yet, under some impossible combination of circumstances—this was what made her laugh, and made her cry so bitterly—but Aunt Agatha, poor soul, could not enter into her heart and see what she meant.

They were in this state of agitation when Mary came in, all unconscious of any disturbance. And a further change arose in Winnie at sight of her sister. Her tears dried up, but her eyes continued to blaze. "It is your friend, Mrs. Kirkman, who has been paying us a visit," she said, in answer to Mary's question; and it seemed to Mrs. Ochterlony that the blame was transferred to her own shoulders, and that it was she who had been doing something, and showing herself the general enemy.

"She is a horrid woman," said Aunt Agatha, hotly. "Mary, I wish you would explain to her,

that after what has happened it cannot give me any pleasure to see her here. This is twice that she has insulted us. You will mention that we are not—not used to it. It may do for the soldiers' wives, poor things! but she has no right to come here."

"She must mean to call Mary to repentance, too," said Winnie. She had been thinking, with a certain melting of heart, of what Mary had once said to her; yet she could not refrain from flinging a dart at her sister ere she returned to think about herself.

All this time, Mrs. Kirkman was seated in Mary's room, waiting. Her little encounter had restored her to herself. She had come back to her lofty position of superiority and goodness. She would have said herself that she had carried the Gospel message to that poor sinner, and that it had been rejected; and there was a certain satisfaction of woe in her heart. It was necessary that she should do her duty to Mary also, about whom, when she started, she had been rather compunctious. There is nothing more strange than the processes of thought by which a limited understanding comes to grow into content with itself, and approval of its own actions. It seemed to this good woman's straitened soul that she had been right, almost more than right, in seizing

upon the opportunity presented to her, and making an appeal to a sinner's perverse heart. And she thought it would be right to point out to Mary, how any trouble that might be about to overwhelm her was for her good, and that she herself had, like Providence, acted for the best. She looked about the room with actual curiosity, and shook her head at the sight of the Major's sword, hanging over the mantel-piece, and the portraits of the three boys underneath. She shook her head, and thought of creature-worship, and how some stroke was needed to wean Mrs. Ochterlony's heart from its inordinate affections. "It will keep her from trusting to a creature," she said to herself, and by degrees came to look complacently on her own position, and to settle how she should tell the tale to be also for the best. It never occurred to her to think what poor hands hers were to meddle with the threads of fate, or to decide which or what calamity was "for the best." Nor did any consideration of the mystery of pain disturb her mind. She saw no complications in it. Your dearest ties—your highest assurances of good—were but "blessings lent us for a day," and it seemed only natural to Mrs. Kirkman that such blessings should be yielded up in a reasonable way. She herself had neither had nor relinquished any particular blessings.

Colonel Kirkman was very good in a general way, and very correct in his theological sentiments; but he was a very steady and substantial possession, and did not suggest any idea of being lent for a day—and his wife felt that she herself was fortunately beyond that necessity, but that it would be for Mary's good if she had another lesson on the vanity of earthly endowments. And thus she sat, feeling rather comfortable about it, and too sadly superior to be offended by her agitation downstairs, in Mrs. Ochterlony's room.

Mary went in with her fair face brightened by her walk, a little soft anxiety (perhaps) in her eyes, or at least curiosity,—a little indignation, and yet the faintest touch of amusement about her mouth. She went in and shut the door, leaving her sister and Aunt Agatha below, moved by what they supposed to be a much deeper emotion. Nobody in the house so much as dreamt that anything of any importance was going on there. There was not a sound as of a raised voice or agitated utterance as there had been when Mrs. Kirkman made her appeal to Winnie. But when the door of Mrs. Ochterlony's room opened again, and Mary appeared, showing her visitor out, her countenance was changed, as if by half-a-dozen years. She followed her

visitor downstairs, and opened the door for her, and looked after her as she went away, but not the ghost of a smile came upon Mary's face. She did not offer her hand, nor say a word at parting that any one could hear. Her lips were compressed, without smile or syllable to move them, and closed as if they never would open again, and every drop of blood seemed to be gone from her face. When Mrs. Kirkman went away from the door, Mary closed it, and went back again to her own room. She did not say a word, nor look as if she had anything to say. She went to her wardrobe and took out a bag, and put some things into it, and then she tied on her bonnet, everything being done as if she had planned it all for years. When she was quite ready, she went downstairs and went to the drawing-room, where Winnie, agitated and disturbed, sat talking, saying a hundred wild things, of which Aunt Agatha knew but half the meaning. When Mary looked in at the door, the two who were there, started, and stared at her with amazed eyes. "What has happened, Mary?" cried Aunt Agatha; and though she was beginning to resume her lost tranquillity, she was so scared by Mrs. Ochterlony's face that she had a palpitation which took away her breath, and made her sink down panting and lay her hands upon her heart.

Mary, for her part, was perfectly composed and in possession of her senses. She made no fuss at all, nor complaint,—but nothing could conceal the change, nor alter the wonderful look in her eyes.

"I am going to Liverpool," she said, "I must see Will immediately, and I want to go by the next train. There is nothing the matter with him. It is only something I have just heard, and I must see him without loss of time."

"What is it, Mary?" gasped Aunt Agatha. "You have heard something dreadful. Are any of the boys mixed up in it? Oh, say something, and don't look in that dreadful fixed way."

"Am I looking in a dreadful fixed way?" said Mary, with a faint smile. "I did not mean it. No, there is nothing the matter with any of the boys. But I have heard something that has disturbed me, and I must see Will. If Hugh should come while I am away——"

But here her strength broke down. A choking sob came from her breast. She seemed on the point of breaking out into some wild cry for help or comfort; but it was only a spasm, and it passed. Then she came to Aunt Agatha and kissed her. "Good-bye: if either of the boys come, keep them till I come back," she said. She had looked so fair and so strong in the com-

posure of her middle age when she stood there only an hour before, that the strange despair which seemed to have taken possession of her, had all the more wonderful effect. It woke even Winnie from her preoccupation, and they both came round her, wondering and disquieted, to know what was the matter. "Something must have happened to Will," said Aunt Agatha.

"It is that woman who has brought her bad news," cried Winnie; and then both together they cried out, "What is it, Mary? have you bad news?"

"Nothing that I have not known for years," said Mrs. Ochterlony, and she kissed them both, as if she was kissing them for the last time, and disengaged herself, and turned away. "I cannot wait to tell you any more," they heard her say as she went to the door; and there they stood, looking at each other, conscious more by some change in the atmosphere than by mere eyesight, that she was gone. She had no time to speak or to look behind her; and when Aunt Agatha rushed to the window, she saw Mary far off on the road, going steady and swift with her bag in her hand. In the midst of her anxiety and suspicion, Miss Seton even felt a pang at the sight of the bag in Mary's hand. "As if there was no one to carry it for her!" The two who

were left behind could but look at each other, feeling somehow a sense of shame, and instinctive consciousness that this new change, whatever it was, involved trouble far more profound than the miseries over which they had been brooding. Something that she had known for years! What was there in these quiet words which made Winnie's veins tingle, and the blood rush to her face? All these quiet years was it possible that a cloud had ever been hovering which Mary knew of, and yet held her way so steadily? As for Aunt Agatha, she was only perplexed and agitated, and full of wonder, making every kind of suggestion. Will might have broken his leg —he might have got into trouble with his uncle. It might be something about Islay. Oh! Winnie, my darling, what do you think it can be? Something that she had known for years!

This was what it really was. It seemed to Mary as if for years and years she had known all about it; how it would get to be told to her poor boy; how it would act upon his strange half-developed nature; how Mrs. Kirkman would tell her of it, and the things she would put into her travelling bag, and the very hour the train would leave. It was a miserably slow train, stopping everywhere, waiting at a dreary junction for several trains in the first chill of night. But she

seemed to have known it all, and to have felt the same dreary wind blow, and the cold creeping to the heart, and to be used and deadened to it. Why is it that one feels so cold when one's heart is bleeding and wounded? It seemed to go in through the physical covering, which shrinks at such moments from the sharp and sensitive soul, and to thrill her with a shiver as of ice and snow. She passed Mrs. Kirkman on the way, but could not take any notice of her, and she put down her veil and drew her shawl closely about her, and sat in a corner that she might escape recognition. But it was hard upon her that the train should be so slow, though that too she seemed to have known for years.

Thus the cross of which she had partially and by moments tasted the bitterness for so long, was laid at last full upon Mary's shoulders. She went carrying it, marking her way, as it were, by blood-drops which answered for tears, to do what might be done, that nobody but herself might suffer. For one thing, she did not lose a moment. If Will had been ill, or if he had been in any danger, she would have done the same. She was a woman who had no need to wait to make up her mind. And perhaps she might not be too late, perhaps her boy meant no evil. He was her boy, and it was hard to associate evil or un-

kindness with him. Poor Will! perhaps he had but gone away because he could not bear to see his mother fallen from her high estate. Then it was that a flush of fiery colour came to Mary's face, but it was only for a moment; things had gone too far for that. She sat at the junction waiting, and the cold wind blew in upon her, and pierced to her heart—and it was nothing that she had not known for years.



CHAPTER IX.

WHEN Mary went away, she left the two ladies at the Cottage in a singular excitement and perplexity. They were tingling with the blows which they had themselves received, and yet at the same time they were hushed and put to shame, as it were, for any secondary pang they might be feeling, by the look in Mrs. Ochterlony's face, and by her sudden departure. Aunt Agatha, who knew of few mysteries in life, and thought that where neither sickness nor death was, nor any despairs of blighted love or disappointed hope, there could not be anything very serious to suffer, would have got over it, and set it down as one of Mary's ways, had she been by herself. But Winnie was not so easily satisfied; her mind was possessed by the thought, in which no doubt there was a considerable mingling of vanity, that her husband would strike her through her friends.

It seemed as if he had done so now; Winnie did not know precisely what it was that Percival knew about her sister, but only that it was something discreditable, something that would bring Mary down from her pinnacle of honour and purity. And now he had done it, and driven Mrs. Ochterlony to despair; but what was it about Will? Or was Will a mere pretence on the part of the outraged and terrified woman to get away? Something she had known for years! This was the thought which had chiefly moved Winnie, going to her heart. She herself had lived a stormy life; she had done a great many things which she ought not to have done; she had never been absolutely wicked or false, nor forfeited her reputation; but she knew in her heart that her life had not been a fair and spotless life; and when she thought of its strivings, and impatience, and selfwill, and bitter discontent, and of the serene course of existence which her sister had led in the quietness, her heart smote her. Perhaps it was for her sake that this blow, which Mary had known of for years, had at last descended upon her head. All the years of her own stormy career, her sister had been living at Kirtell, doing no harm, doing good, serving God, bringing up her children, covering her sins, if she had sinned, with repentance and good deeds;

and yet for Winnie's sake, for her petulance, and fury, and hotheadedness, the angel (or was it the demon?) had lifted his fiery sword and driven Mary out of Paradise. All this moved Winnie strangely; and along with these were other thoughts—thoughts of her own strange miserable unprotectedness, with only Aunt Agatha to stand between her and the world, while she still had a husband in the world, between whom and herself there stood no deadly shame nor fatal obstacle, and whose presence would shield her from all such intrusions as that she had just suffered from. He had sinned against her, but that a woman can forgive—and she had not sinned against him, not to such an extent as is unpardonable in a woman. Perhaps there might even be something in the fact that Winnie had found Kirtell and quiet not the medicine suited to her mind, and that even Mary's flight into the world had brought a tingling into her wings, a longing to mount into freer air, and rush back to her fate. Thus a host of contradictory feelings joined in one great flame of excitement, which rose higher and higher all through the night. To fly forth upon him, and controvert his wicked plans, and save the sister who was being sacrificed for her sake; and yet to take possession of him back again, and set him up before her, her shield and buckler against

the world; and at the same time to get out and break loose from this flowery cage, and rush back into the big world, where there would be air and space to move in—such were Winnie's thoughts. In the morning, when she came downstairs, which was an hour earlier than usual, to Aunt Agatha's great amazement, she wore her travelling dress, and had an air of life and movement in her, which startled Miss Seton, and which, since her return to Kirtell, had never been seen in Winnie's looks before.

"It is very kind of you to come down, Winnie, my darling, when you knew I was alone," said Aunt Agatha, giving her a tender embrace.

"I don't think it is kind in me," said Winnie; and then she sat down, and took her sister's office upon her, to Miss Seton's still greater bewilderment, and make the tea, without quite knowing what she was doing. "I suppose Mary has been travelling all night," she said; "I am going into Carlisle, Aunt Agatha, to that woman, to know what it is all about."

"Oh, my darling, you were always so generous," cried Aunt Agatha, in amaze; "but you must not do it. She might say things to you, or you might meet people——"

"If I did meet people, I hope I know how to take care of myself," said Winnie; and that flush

came to her face, and that light to her eye, like the neigh of the war-horse when he hears the sound of battle.

Aunt Agatha was struck dumb. Terror seized her, as she looked at the kindling cheeks and rapid gesture, and saw the Winnie of old, all impatient and triumphant, dawning out from under the cloud.

"Oh, Winnie, you are not going away," she cried, with a thrill of presentiment. "Mary has gone, and they have all gone. You are not going to leave me all by myself here?"

"I?" said Winnie. There was scorn in the tone, and yet what was chiefly in it was a bitter affectation of humility. "It will be time enough to fear my going, when any one wants me to go."

Miss Seton was a simple woman, and yet she saw that there lay more meaning under these words than the plain meaning they bore. She clasped her hands, and lifted her appealing eyes to Winnie's face—and she was about to speak, to question, to remonstrate, to importune, when her companion suddenly seized her hands tight, and silenced her by the sight of an emotion more earnest and violent than anything Aunt Agatha knew.

"Don't speak to me," she said, with her eyes

blazing, and clasped the soft old hands in hers till she hurt them. "Don't speak to me; I don't know what I am going to do—but don't talk to me, don't look at me, Aunt Agatha. Perhaps my life—and Mary's—may be fixed to-day."

"Oh, Winnie, I don't understand you," cried Aunt Agatha, trembling, and freeing her poor little crushed soft hands.

"And I don't uuderstand myself," said Winnie. "Don't let us say a word more."

"What did it mean, that flush in her face, that thrill of purpose and meaning in her words, and her step, and her whole figure?—and what had Mary to do with it?—and how could their fate be fixed one way or other?" Aunt Agatha asked herself these questions vainly, and could make nothing of them. But after breakfast she went to her room and said her prayers—which was the best thing to do; and in that moment Winnie, poor Winnie, whose prayers were few though her wants were countless, took a rose from the trellis, and pinned it in with her brooch, and went softly away. I don't know what connexion there was between the rose and Aunt Agatha's prayers, but somehow the faint perfume softened the wild, agitated, stormy heart, and suggested to it that sacrifice was being made

and supplications offered somewhere for its sins and struggles. Thus, when his sons and daughters went out to their toils and pleasures, Job drew near the altar lest some of them might curse God in their hearts.

It was strange to see her sallying forth by herself, she who had been shielded from every stranger's eye; and yet there was a sense of freedom in it—freedom, and danger, and exhilaration, which was sweet to Winnie. She went rushing in to Carlisle in the express train, flying as it were on the wings of the wind. But Mrs. Kirkman was not at home. She was either working in her district, or she was teaching in the infant school, or giving out work to the poor women, or perhaps at the mothers' meeting, which she always said was the most precious opportunity of all; or possibly she might be making calls—which, however, was an hypothesis which her maid rejected as unworthy of her. Mrs. Percival found herself brought to a sudden standstill when she heard this. The sole audible motive which she had proposed to herself for her expedition was to see Mrs. Kirkman, and for the moment she did not know what to do. After a while, however, she turned and went slowly yet eagerly in another direction. She concluded she would go

to the Askells, who might know something about it. They were Percival's friends; they might be in the secret of his plans—they might convey to him the echo of her indignation and disdain; possibly even he might himself—— But Winnie would not let herself consider that thought. Captain Askell's house was not the same cold and neglected place where Mary had first seen Emma after their return. They had a little more money—and that was something; and Nelly was older—which was a great deal more; but even Nelly could not altogether abrogate the character which her mother gave to her house. The maid who opened the door had bright ribbons in her cap, but yet was a sloven, half-suppressed; and the carpets on the stairs were badly fitted, and threatened here and there to entangle the unwary foot. And there was a bewildering multiplicity of sounds in the house. You could hear the maids in the kitchen, and the children in the nursery—and even as Winnie approached the drawing-room she could hear voices thrilling with an excitement which did not become that calm retreat. There was a sound as of a sob, and there was a broken voice a little loud in its accents. Winnie went on with a quicker throb of her heart—perhaps he himself—— But when the door opened, it was upon a scene she

had not thought of. Mrs. Kirkman was there, seated high as in a throne, looking with a sad but touching resignation upon the disturbed household. And it was Emma who was sobbing —sobbing and crying out, and launching a furious little soft incapable clenched hand into the air—while Nelly, all glowing red, eyes lit up with indignation, soft lips quivering with distress, stood by, with a gaze of horror and fury and disgust fixed on the visitor's face. Winnie went in, and they all stopped short and stared at her, as if she had dropped from the skies. Her appearance startled and dismayed them, and yet it was evidently in perfect accordance with the spirit of the scene. She could see that at the first glance. She saw they were already discussing this event, whatever it might be. Therefore Winnie did not hesitate. She offered no ordinary civilities herself, nor required any. She went straight up to where Mrs. Kirkman sat, not looking at the others. "I have come to ask you what it means," she said; and Winnie felt that they all stopped and gave way to her as to one who had a right to know.

"That is what I am asking," cried Emma, "what does it mean? We have all known it for ages, and none of us said a word. And she that sets up for being a Christian! As if there

was no honour left in the regiment, and as if we were to talk of everything that happens! Ask her, Mrs. Percival. I don't believe half nor a quarter what they say of any one. When they dare to raise up a scandal about Madonna Mary, none of us are safe. And a thing that we have all known for a hundred years!"

"Oh, mamma!" said Nelly, softly, under her breath. The child knew everything about everybody, as was to have been expected; every sort of tale had been told in her presence. But what moved her to shame was her mother's share. It was a murmured compunction, a vicarious acknowledgment of sin. "Oh, mamma!"

"It is not I that am saying it," cried Emma, again resuming her sob. "I would have been torn to pieces first. Me to harm her that was always a jewel! Oh, ask her, ask her! What is going to come of it, and what does it mean?"

"My dear, perhaps Nelly had better retire before we speak of it any more," said Mrs. Kirkman, meekly. "I am not one that thinks it right to encourage delusions in the youthful mind, but still, if there is much more to be said——"

And then it was Nelly's turn to speak. "You have talked about everything in the world

without sending me away," cried the girl, "till I wondered and wondered you did not die of shame. But I'll stay now. One is safe," said Nelly, with a little cry of indignation and youthful rage, "when you so much as name Mrs. Ochterlony's name."

All this time Winnie was standing upright and eager before Mrs. Kirkman's chair. It was not from incivility that they offered her no place among them. No one thought of it, and neither did she. The conflict around her had sobered Winnie's thoughts. There was no tracc of her husband in it, nor of that striking her through her friends which had excited and exhilarated her mind; but the family instinct of mutual defence awoke in her. "My sister has heard something which has—which has had a singular effect upon her," said Winnie, pausing instinctively, as if she had been about to betray something. "And it is you who have done it; I want to know what it means."

"Oh, she must be ill!" wailed poor Emma; "I knew she would be ill. If she dies it will be your fault. Oh, let me go up and see her. I knew she must be ill."

As for Mrs. Kirkman, she shook her head and her long curls, and looked compassionately upon her agitated audience. And then Winnie

heard all the long-hoarded well-remembered tale. The only difference made in it was that by this time all confidence in the Gretna Green marriage, which had once been allowed, at least as a matter of courtesy, had faded out of the story. Even Mrs. Askell no longer thought of that. When the charm of something to tell began to work, the Captain's wife chimed in with the narrative of her superior officer. All the circumstances of that long-past event were revealed to the wonder-stricken hearers. Mary's distress, and Major Ochterlony's anxiety, and the consultations he had with everybody, and the wonderful indulgence and goodness of the ladies at the station, who never made any difference, and all their benevolent hopes that so uncomfortable an incident was buried in the past, and could now have no painful results;—all this was told to Winnie in detail; and in the confidential committee thus formed, her own possible deficiencies and shortcomings were all passed over. "Nothing would have induced me to say a syllable on the subject if you had not been dear Mary's sister," Mrs. Kirkman said; and then she relieved her mind and told it all.

Winnie, for her part, sat dumb and listened. She was more than struck dumb—she was stupe-

fied by the news. She had thought that Mary might have been "foolish," as she herself had been "foolish;" even that Mary might have gone further, and compromised herself; but of a dishonour which involved such consequences she had never dreamed. She sat and heard it all in a bewildered horror, with the faces of Hugh and Will floating like spectres before her eyes. A woman gone astray from her duty as a wife was not, Heaven help her! so extraordinary an object in poor Winnie's eyes—but, good heavens! Mary's marriage, Mary's boys, the very foundation and beginning of her life! The room went round and round with her as she sat and listened. A public trial, a great talk in the papers, one brother against another, and Mary, Mary, the chief figure in all! Winnie put her hands up to her ears, not to shut out the sound of this incredible story, but to deaden the noises in her head, the throbbing of all her pulses, and stringing of all her nerves. She was so stupefied that she could make no sort of stand against it, no opposition to the evidence, which, indeed, was crushing, and left no opening for unbelief. She accepted it all, or rather, was carried away by the bewildering, overwhelming tide. And even Emma Askell got excited, and woke up out of her crying, and added her con-

tribution of details. Poor little Nelly, who had heard it all before, had retired to a corner and taken up her work, and might be seen in the distance working furiously, with a hot flush on her cheek, and now and then wiping a furtive tear from her eye. Nelly did not know what to say, nor how to meet it—but there was in her little woman's soul a conviction that something unknown must lie behind, and that the inference at least was not true.

"And you told Will?" said Winnie, rousing up at last. "You knew all the horrible harm it might do, and you told Will."

"It was not I who told him," said Mrs. Kirkman; and then there was a pause, and the two ladies looked at each other, and a soft, almost imperceptible flutter, visible only to a female eye, revealed that there might be something else to say.

"Who told him?" said Winnie, perceiving the indications, and feeling her heart thrill and beat high once more.

"I am very sorry to say anything, I am sure, to make it worse," said Mrs. Kirkman. "It was not I who told him. I suppose you are aware that—that Major Percival is here? He was present at the marriage as well as I. I wonder he never told you. It was he who told

Will. He only came to get the explanations from me."

They thought she would very probably faint, or make some demonstration of distress, not knowing that this was what poor Winnie had been waiting, almost hoping for; and on the contrary, it seemed to put new force into her, and a kind of beauty, at which her companions gazed aghast. The blood rushed into her faded cheek, and light came to her eyes. She could not speak at first, so overwhelming was the tide of energy and new life that seemed to pour into her veins. After all, she had been a true prophet. It was all for her sake. He had struck at her through her friends, and she could not be angry with him. It was a way like another of showing love, a way hard upon other people, no doubt, but carrying a certain poignant sweetness to her for whose sake the blow had fallen. But Winnie knew she was in the presence of keen observers, and put restraint upon herself.

"Where is Major Percival to be found?" she said, with a measured voice, which she thought concealed her excitement, but which was overdone, and made it visible. They thought she was meditating something desperate when she spoke in that unnatural voice, and drew her shawl round her in that rigid way. She might

have been going to stab him, the bystanders thought, or do him some grievous harm.

"You would not go to him for that?" said Emma, with a little anxiety, stopping short at once in her tears and in her talk. "They never will let you talk to them about what they have done; and then they always say you take part with your own friends."

Mrs. Kirkman, too, showed a sudden change of interest, and turned to the new subject with zeal and zest: "If you are really seeking a reconciliation with your husband——" she began; but this was more than Winnie could bear.

"I asked where Major Percival was to be found," she said; "I was not discussing my own affairs: but Nelly will tell me. If that is all about Mary, I will go away."

"I will go with you," cried Emma; "only wait till I get my things. I knew she would be ill; and she must not think that we are going to forsake her now. As if it could make any difference to us that have known it for ever so long! Only wait till I get my things."

"Poor Mary! she is not in a state of mind to be benefited by any visit," said Mrs. Kirkman, solemnly. "If it were not for that, *I* would go."

As for Winnie, she was trembling with impatience, eager to be free and to be gone, and yet

not content to go until she had left a sting behind her, like a true woman. "How you all talk!" she cried; "as if your making any difference could matter. You can set it going, but all you can do will never stop it. Mary has gone to Will, whom you have made her enemy. Perhaps she has gone to ask her boy to save her honour; and you think she will mind about your making a difference, or about your visits—when it is a thing of life or death!"

And she went to the door all trembling, scarcely able to support herself, shivering with excitement and wild anticipation. Now she *must* see him—now it was her duty to go to him and ask him why—— She rushed away, forgetting even that she had not obtained the information she came to seek. She had been speaking of Mary, but it was not of Mary she was thinking. Mary went totally out of her mind as she hurried down the stairs. Now there was no longer any choice; she must go to him, must see him, must renew the interrupted but never-ended struggle. It filled her with an excitement which she could not subdue nor resist. Her heart beat so loud that she did not hear the sound of her own step on the stairs, but seemed somehow to be carried down by the air, which encircled her like a soft whirlwind; and she did not hear Nelly behind

her calling her, to tell her where he lived. She had no recollection of that. She did not wait for any one to open the door for her, but rushed out, moved by her own purpose as by a supernatural influence; and but for the violent start he gave, it would have been into his arms she rushed as she stepped out from the Askells' door.

This was how their meeting happened. Percival had been going there to ask some questions about the Cottage and its inmates, when his wife, with that look he knew so well, with all the coming storm in her eyes, and the breath of excitement quick on her parted lips—stepped out almost into his arms. He was fond of her, notwithstanding all their mutual sins; and their spirits rushed together, though in a different way from that rush which accompanies the meeting of the lips. They rushed together with a certain clang and spark; and the two stood facing each other in the street, defying, hating, struggling, feeling that they belonged to each other once more.

"I must speak with you," said Winnie, in her haste; "take me somewhere that I may speak. Is this your revenge? I know what you have done. When everything is ended that you can do to me, you strike me through my friends."

"If you choose to think so——" said Percival.

"If I choose to think so? What else can I think?" said the hot combatant; and she went on by his side with hasty steps and a passion and force which she had not felt in her since the day when she fled from him. She felt the new tide in her veins, the new strength in her heart. It was not the calm of union, it was the heat of conflict; but still, such as it was, it was her life. She went on with him, never looking or thinking where they were going, till they reached the rooms where he was living, and then, all by themselves, the husband and wife looked each other in the face.

"Why did you leave me, Winnie?" he said. "I might be wrong, but what does it matter? I may be wrong again, but I have got what I wanted. I would not have minded much killing the boy for the sake of seeing you and having it out. Let them manage it their own way; it is none of our business. Come back to me, and let them settle it their own way."

"Never!" cried Winnie, though there was a struggle in her heart. "After doing all the harm you could do to me, do you think you can recall me by ruining my sister? How dare you venture to look me in the face?"

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible] said V[illegible] [illegible] [illegible] back. [illegible] killed, [illegible] There was a sort of [illegible] in it that took her captive; for [illegible] the two had pure motives or a high [illegible] even of conven-

tional goodness to make them hypocrites. They both acknowledged, in a way, that themselves, the two of them, were the chief objects in the universe, and everything else in the world faded into natural insignificance when they stood face to face, and their great perennial conflict was renewed.

"I do not believe it," said Percival. "I have told you I will stick at nothing. Let other people take care of their own affairs. What have you to do in that weedy den with that old woman? You are not good enough, and you never were meant for that. I knew you would come to me at the last."

"But you are mistaken," said Winnie, still breathing fire and flame. "The old woman, as you call her, is good to me, good as nobody ever was. She loves me, though you may think it strange. And if I have come to you it is not for you; it is to ask what you have done, what your horrible motive could be, and why, now you have done every injury to me a man could do, you should try to strike me through my friends."

"I do not care *that* for your friends," said Percival. "It was to force you to see me, and have it out. Let them take care of themselves. Neither man nor woman has any right to interfere in my affairs."

"[illegible] affairs," cried [illegible] anything to do [illegible] me if I wanted [illegible] against. Leave [illegible] in me. I [illegible] you and [illegible] you any [illegible]."

[illegible] with a disdainful shrug of his shoulders. He was familiar enough with the theme. "If you harmed me by that act, I harmed you still more, I suppose," he said. "We have gone over that ground often enough. Let us have it out now. Are you coming back to your home and to me?"

"I came to speak of Lucy," said Winnie, facing him as he turned. "Set those right first who have never done you any harm, and then we can think of the others. The innocent come first. Strike at me like a man, but not through my friends."

She sat down as she spoke, without quite knowing what she did. She sat down, because, though the spirit was moved to passionate energy, the flesh was weak. Perhaps something in the movement touched the man who hated and loved her, as she loved and hated him. A sudden pause came to the conflict, such as does occur

capriciously in such struggles; in the midst of their fury a sudden touch of softness came over them. They were alone—nothing but mists of passion were between them, and though they were fighting like foes, still their perverse souls were one. He came up to her suddenly and seized her hands, not tenderly, but rudely, as was natural to his state of mind.

"Winnie," he said, "this will not do; come away with me. You may struggle as you please, but you are mine. Don't let us make a laughing-stock of ourselves! What are a set of old women and children between you and me? Let them fight it out; it will all come right. What is anything in the world between you and me? Come! I am not going to be turned off or put away as if you did not mind. I know you better than that. Come! I tell you, nothing can stand between you and me."

"Never!" said Winnie, blazing with passion; but even while she spoke the course of the torrent changed. It leaped the feeble boundaries, and went into the other channel—the channel of love which runs side by side with that of hate. "You leave me to be insulted by everybody who has a mind—and if I were to go with you, it is you who would insult me!" cried Winnie. And the tears came pouring to her eyes suddenly like

a thunder-storm. It was all over in a moment, and that was all that was said. What were other people that either he or she should postpone their own affairs to any secondary consideration? Their spirits rushed together with a flash of fire, and roll of thunder. The suddenness of it was the thing that made it effectual. Something "smote the chord of self, that trembling" burst into a tumult of feeling and took to itself the semblance of love; no matter how it had been brought about. Was not anything good that set them face to face, and showed the two that life could not continue for them apart? Neither the tears, nor the reproaches, nor the passion were over, but it changed all at once into such a quarrel has had happened often enough before then. As soon as Winnie came back to her warfare, she had gone back, so to speak, to her duties according to her conception of them. Thus the conflict swelled, and rose, and fluctuated, and softened, like many another; but no more thoughts of the Cottage, or of Aunt Agatha, or of Mary's sudden calamity drew Winnie from her own subject. After all, it was, as she had felt, a pasteboard cottage let down upon her for the convenience of the moment—a thing to disappear by pulleys when the moment of necessity was over. And when they had had it out, she

went off with her husband the same evening, sending a rapid note of explanation to Aunt Agatha—and not with any intention of unkindness, but only with that superior sense of the importance of her own concerns which was natural to her. She hoped Mary would come back soon, and that all would be comfortably settled, she said. "And Mary is more of a companion to you than I ever could be," Winnie added in her letter, with a touch of that strange jealousy which was always latent in her. She was glad that Mary should be Miss Seton's companion, and yet was vexed that anybody should take her place with her aunt, to whom she herself had once been all in all. Thus Winnie, who had gone into Carlisle that morning tragically bent upon the confounding of her husband's plans, and the formation of one eternal wall of separation between them, eloped with him in the evening as if he had been her lover. And there was a certain thrill of pride and tenderness in her bosom to think that to win her back he would stick at nothing, and did not hesitate to strike her through her friends.



CHAPTER X.

THERE is something wonderful in the ease with which the secondary actors in a great crisis can shake themselves free of the event, and return to their own affairs, however exciting the moment may be at which it suits them to strike off. The bystanders turn away from the most horrible calamity, and sit down by their own tables and talk about their own trivial business before the sound of the guns has ceased to vibrate on the air, or the smoke of the battle has dispersed which has brought ruin and misery to their dearest friends. The principle of human nature, that every man should bear his own burden, lies deeper than all philosophy. Winnie, though she had been excited about her sister's mysterious misfortune and roused by it, and was ready, to her own inconvenience, to make a great effort on Mary's behalf, yet

could turn off on her way without any struggle, with that comfortable feeling that all must come right in the end which is so easy for the lookers-on. But the real sufferers could not entertain so charming a confidence. That same day rose heavily over poor Hugh, who, all alone in Earlston, still debated with himself. He had written to his uncle to express his amazement and dismay, and to ask for time to give full consideration to the terrible news he had heard. "You need not fear that I will do anything to wound my mother," the poor boy had written, with a bitter pang in his heart. But after that he had sunk into a maze of questions and discussions with himself, and of miserable uncertainty as to what he ought to do. The idea of asking anybody for information about it seemed almost as bad to him as owning the fact at once; asking about his mother—about facts in her life which she had never herself disclosed—inquiring if, perhaps, she was a woman dishonoured and unworthy of her children's confidence! It seemed to Hugh as if it would be far easier to give up Earlston, and let Will or any one else who pleased have it. He had tried more than once to write to Mr. Churchill, the chaplain, of whom he had heard his mother speak, and of whom he had even a faint traditional sort of recollection; but the

effort always sickened him, and made him rush away in disgust to the open air, and the soothing sounds of nature. He was quite alone during those few days. His neighbours did not know of his return, for he had been so speedily overtaken by this news as to have had no heart to go anywhere or show himself among them. Thus he was left to his own thoughts, and they were bitter. In the very height of his youthful hopes and satisfaction, just at the moment when he was most full of plans, and taking the most perfect pleasure in his life, this bewildering cloud had come on him. He did not even go on with his preparations for the transfer of the Museum, in the sickness of his heart, notwithstanding the eagerness he felt whenever he thought of it to complete that arrangement at least, and secure his uncle's will to that extent, if no more. But it did not seem possible to exert himself about one thing without exerting himself about all, and he who had been so fresh and full of energy, fell supine into a kind of utter wretchedness. The course of his life was stopped when it had been in full career. He was suddenly thrown out of all he had been doing, all he had been planning. The scheme of his existence seemed all at once turned into folly and made a lie of. What could he do?

His lawyer wrote to say that he meant to come to Earlston on some business connected with the estate, but Hugh put him off, and deferred everything. How could he discuss affairs which possibly were not his affairs, but his brother's? How could he enter into any arrangements, or think of anything, however reasonable or necessary, with this sword hanging over his head? He got up early in the morning, and startled the servants before they were up, by opening doors and shutters in his restlessness; and he sat up at night thinking it all over, for ever thinking of it and never coming to any result. How could he inquire, how could he prove or disprove the horrible assertion? Even to think of it seemed a tacit injury to his mother. The only way to do his duty by her seemed to be to give up all and go away to the end of the world. And yet he was a man, and right and justice were dear to him, and he revolted against doing that. It was as if he had been caught by some gigantic iron hand of fate in the sweetness of his fearless life. He had never heard nor read of, he thought, anything so cruel. By times bitter tears came into his eyes, wrung from him by the intolerable pressure. He could not give up his own cause and his mother's cause without a struggle. He could not relinquish his life and rights to another;

and yet how could he defend himself by means that would bring one question to careless lips, one light laugh to the curious world, over his mother's name? Such an idea had never so much as entered into his head. It made his life miserable.

He read over Mr. Penrose's letter a dozen times in the day, and he sat at night with his eyes fixed on the flame of his lamp, calling back his childhood and its events. It was as vague as a dream, and he could not identify his broken recollections. If he could have gone to Mrs. Ochterlony and talked it over with her, Hugh might have remembered many things, but wanting that thread of guidance he lost himself in the misty maze. By dint of thinking it over and over, and representing the scene to his mind in every possible way, it came to him finally to believe that some faint impression of the event which he was asked to remember did linger in his memory, and that thought, which he could not put away, stung him like a serpent. Was it really true that he remembered it? Then the accusation must be true, and he nameless and without rights, and Mary——. Not much wonder that the poor boy, sick to the heart, turned his face from the light and hid himself, and felt that he would be glad if he could only

die. Yet dying would be of no use, for there was Islay who would come next to him, who never would have dreamt of dispossessing him, but who, if this was true, would need to stand aside in his turn and make room for Will. Will !—It was hard for Hugh not to feel a thrill of rage and scorn and amaze mixing with his misery when he thought of the younger brother to whom he had been so continually indulgent and affectionate. He who had been always the youngest, the most guarded and tended, whom Hugh could remember in his mother's arms, on her knee, a part of her as it were; he to turn upon them all, and stain her fame, and ruin the family honour for his own base advantage! These thoughts came surging up one after another, and tore Hugh's mind to pieces and made him as helpless as a child, now with one suggestion, now with another. What could he do? And accordingly he did nothing but fall into a lethargy and maze of despair, did not sleep, did not eat, filled the servants' minds with the wildest surmises, and shut himself up, as if that could have deferred the course of events, or shut out the coming fate.

This had lasted only a day or two, it is true, but it might have been for a century, to judge by Hugh's feelings. He felt indeed as if he had

never been otherwise, never been light-hearted or happy, or free to take pleasure in his life; as if he had always been an impostor expecting to be found out. Nature itself might have awakened him from his stupor had he been left to himself; but, as it happened, there came a sweeter touch. He had become feverishly anxious about his letters ever since the arrival of that one which had struck him so unlooked-for a blow; and he started when something was brought to him in the evening at an hour when letters did not arrive, and a little note with a little red seal, very carefully folded that no curious eye might be able to penetrate. Poor Hugh felt a certain thrill of fright at the innocent-seeming thing, coming insidiously at this moment when he thought himself safe, and bringing, for anything he could tell, the last touch to his misery. He held it in his hand while it was explained to him that one of the servants had been to Carlisle with an order given before the world had changed—an order made altogether antiquated and out of course by having been issued three days before; and that he had brought back this note. Only when the door closed upon the man and his explanation did Hugh break the tiny seal. It was not a letter to be alarmed at. It was written as it were with tears, sweet tears of

sympathy and help and tender succour. This was what Nelly's little letter said:—

"DEAR MR. HUGH,—I want to let you know of something that has happened to-day, and at which you may perhaps be surprised. Mrs. Percival met Major Percival here, and I think they have made friends; and she has gone away with him. I think you ought to know, because she told us dear Mrs. Ochterlony had gone to Liverpool; and Miss Seton will be left alone. I should have asked mamma to let me go and stay with her, but I am going into Scotland to an old friend of papa's, who is living at Gretna. I remember hearing long ago that it was at Gretna dear Mrs. Ochterlony was married—and perhaps there is somebody there who remembers her. If you see Aunt Agatha, would you please ask her when it happened? I should so like to see the place, and ask the people if they remember her. I think she must have been so beautiful then; she is beautiful now—I never loved anybody so much in my life. And I am afraid she is anxious about Will. I should not like to trouble you, for I am sure you must have a great deal to occupy your mind, but I should so like to know how dear Mrs. Ochterlony is, and if there is anything the matter with Will. He always was very

[illegible]

[illegible] too [illegible]

[illegible] knowing [illegible]

herself said, what she meant, or knowing only that her little heart swelled with kind impulses, tender pity, and indignation, and yet pity over all; pity for Will, too, who, perhaps, was going to make them all miserable. But Nelly could not have understood the effect her little letter had upon Hugh. He shook himself free after it, as if from chains that had been upon him. He gave a groan, poor boy, at the calamity which was not to be ignored, and then he said to himself, "After all!" After all, and in spite of all, while there was Nelly living, it was not unmingled ill to live. And when he looked at it again, a more reasonable kind of comfort seemed to come to him out of the girl's letter; his eye was caught by the word struck out, which yet was not too carefully struck out, "where dear Mrs. Ochterlony was first married." He gave a cry when this new light entered into his mind. He roused himself up from his gloom and stupor, and thought and thought until his very brain ached as with labour, and his limbs began to thrill as with new vigour coming back. And a glimmering of the real truth suddenly rushed, all vague and dazzling, upon Hugh's darkness. There had been no hint in Mr. Penrose's letter of any such interpretation of the mystery. Mr. Penrose himself had received no such hint, and

[illegible] She who never went upon visits, she who knew better, and had insight in her eyes, and saw it could not be. These thoughts passed through Hugh's mind in a flood, and changed heaven and earth round about him, and set him on solid ground, as it were, instead of chaos. He was not wise enough, good enough, pure enough, to know the truth of himself—but Nelly could see it, as with angel eyes. He was young, and he loved Nelly, and that was how it appeared to him. Shame that had been brooding over him in the darkness, fled away. He rose up and felt as if he were yet a man, and

had still his life before him, whatever might happen; and that he was there not only to comfort and protect his mother, but to defend and vindicate her; not to run away and keep silent like the guilty, but to face the pain of it, and the shame of it, if such bitter need was, and establish the truth. All this came to Hugh's mind from the simple little letter, which Nelly, crying and burning with indignation and pity, and an intolerable sense of wrong, had written without knowing what she meant. For anything Hugh could tell, his mother's innocence and honour, even if intact, might never be proved,—might do no more for him than had it been guilt and shame. The difference was that he had seen this accusation, glancing through Nelly's eyes, to be impossible; that he had found out that there was an interpretation somewhere, and the load was taken off his soul.

The change was so great, and his relief so immense, that he felt as if even that night he must act upon it. He could not go away, as he longed to do, for all modes of communication with the world until the morning were by that time impracticable. But he did what eased his mind at least. He wrote to Mr. Penrose a very grave, almost solemn letter, with neither horror nor even anger in it. "I do not know what the cir-

[illegible] be," he [illegible] doubt [illegible] —and I shall come [illegible] may be made [illegible] to Mr. [illegible] had the courage [illegible] When he [illegible] himself still [illegible] deceive [illegible] Nelly had [illegible] divine simplicity [illegible] was certain that everything would be made clear and manifest to the law of the world. It might be otherwise: Mrs. Ochterlony might never be able to establish her own spotless name, and her elder children's rights. It might be, by some horrible conspiracy of circumstances, that his name and position should be taken from him, and his honour stained beyond remedy. Such a thing was still possible. But Hugh felt that even then all would not be lost, that God would still be in heaven, and justice and mercy to some certain extent on the earth, and duty still before him. The situation was not changed, but only the key-note of his thoughts was changed, and his mind had come back to itself. He rose up, though it was getting late, and rang the bell for Francis Ochterlony's

favourite servant, and began to arrange about the removal of the Museum. He might not be master long—in law; but he was master by right of nature and his uncle's will, and he would at least do his duty as long as he remained there.

Mrs. Gilsland, the housekeeper, was in the hall as he went out, and she curtseyed and stood before him, rustling in her black silk gown, and eyeing him doubtfully. She was afraid to disturb the Squire, as she said, but there was a poor soul there, if so be as he would speak a word to her. It annoyed Hugh to be drawn away from his occupations just as he had been roused to return to them; but Nelly's letter and the influence of profound emotion had given a certain softness to his soul. He asked what it was, and heard it was a poor woman who had come with a petition. She had come a long way, and had a child with her, but nobody had liked to disturb the young Squire: and now it was providential, Mrs. Gilsland thought, that he should have passed just at that moment. "She has been gone half her lifetime, Mr. Hugh—I mean Sir," said the housekeeper, "though she was born and bred here; and her poor man is that bad with the paralytics that she has to do everything, which she thought if perhaps you would give her the new lodge——"

"The new lodge is not built yet," said Hugh, with a pang in his heart, feeling, notwithstanding his new courage, that it was hard to remember all his plans and the thousand changes it might never be in his power to make; "and it ought to be some one who has a claim on the family," he added, with a half-conscious sigh.

"And that's what poor Susan has," said Mrs. Gilsland. "Master would never have said no if it had been in his time; for he knew as he had been unjust to them poor folks; and a good claim on you, Mr. Hugh. She is old Sommerville's daughter, as you may have heard talk on, and as decent a woman——"

"Who was old Sommerville?" said Hugh.

"He was one as was a faithful servant to your poor papa," said the housekeeper. "I've heard as he lost his place all for the Captain's sake, as was Captain Ochterlony then, and as taking a young gentleman as ever was. If your mother was to hear of it, Mr. Hugh, she is not the lady to forget. A poor servant may be most a friend to his master—I've heard many and many a one say so that was real quality—and your mamma being a true lady——"

"Yes," said Hugh, "a good servant is a friend; and if she had any claims upon my father, I will certainly see her; but I am busy

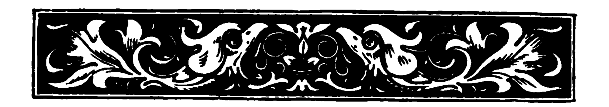
now. I have not been—well. I have been neglecting a great many things, and now that I feel a little better, I have a great deal to do."

"Oh, sir, it isn't lost time as makes a poor creature's heart to sing for joy!" said Mrs. Gilsland. She was a formidable housekeeper, but she was a kind woman; and somehow a subtle perception that their young master had been in trouble had crept into the mind of the household. "Which it's grieved as we've all been to see as you was not—well," she added, with a curtsey; "it's been the watching and the anxiety; and so good as you was, sir, to the Squire. But poor Susan has five mile to go, and a child in arms, as is a load to carry; and her poor sick husband at home. And it was borne in upon them as perhaps for old Sommerville's sake——"

"Well, who was he?" said Hugh, with languid interest, a little fretted by the interruption, yet turning his steps towards the housekeeper's room, from which a gleam of firelight shone, at the end of a long corridor. He did not know anything about old Sommerville; the name awakened no associations in his mind, and even the housekeeper's long narrative as she followed him caught his attention only by intervals. She was so anxious to produce an effect for her *protégée's*

sake that she began with an elaborate description of old Sommerville's place and privileges, which whizzed past Hugh's ear without ever touching his mind. But he was too good-hearted to resist the picture of the poor woman who had five miles to go, and a baby and a sick husband. She was sitting basking before the fire in Mrs. Gilsland's room, poor soul, thinking as little about old Sommerville as the young Squire was; her heart beating high with anxiety about the new lodge—beating as high as if it was a kingdom she had hopes of conquering; with excitement as profound as that which moved Hugh himself when he thought of his own fortune hanging in the balance, and of the name and place and condition of which perhaps he was but an usurper. It was as much to poor Susan to have the lodge as it was to him to have Earlston, or rather a great deal more. And he went in, putting a stop to Mrs. Gilsland's narrative, and began to talk to the poor suitor; and the firelight played pleasantly on the young man's handsome face, as he stood full in its ruddy illumination to hear her story, with his own anxiety lying at his heart like a stone. To look at this scene, it looked the least interesting of all that was going on at that moment in the history of the Ochterlony family—less important

than what was taking place in Liverpool, where Mary was—or even than poor Aunt Agatha's solitary tears over Winnie's letter, which had just been taken in to her, and which went to her heart. The new lodge might never be built, and Hugh Ochterlony might never have it in his power to do anything for poor Susan, who was old Sommerville's daughter. But at least he was not hard-hearted, and it was a kind of natural grace and duty to hear what the poor soul had to say.



CHAPTER XI.

IT was morning when Mary arrived in Liverpool, early morning, chilly and grey. She had been detained on the road by the troublesome delays of a cross route, and the fresh breath of the autumnal morning chilled her to the heart. And she had not come with any distinct plan. She did not know what she was going to do. It had seemed to her as if the mere sight of her would set her boy right, had there been evil in his mind; and she did not know that there was any evil in his mind. She knew nothing of what was in Mr. Penrose's letter, which had driven Hugh to such despair. She did not even know whether Will had so much as mentioned his discovery to Uncle Penrose, or whether he might not have fled there, simply to get away from the terrible thought of his mother's

disgrace. If it were so, she had but to take her boy in her arms, to veil her face with shame, yet raise it with conscious honour, and tell him how it all was. This, perhaps, was what she most thought of doing—to show him the rights of the story, of which he had only heard the evil-seeming side, and to reconcile him to herself and the world, and his life, on all of which a shadow must rest, as Mary thought, if any shadow rested on his mother. By times she was grieved with Will—"angry," as he would have said—to think he had gone away in secret without unfolding his troubles to the only creature who could clear them up; but by times it seemed to her as though it was only his tenderness of her, his delicacy for her, that had driven him away. That he could not endure the appearance of a stain upon her, that he was unable to let her know the possibility of any suspicion—this was chiefly what Mrs. Ochterlony thought. And it made her heart yearn towards the boy. Anything about Earlston, or Hugh, or the property, or Will's rights, had not crossed her mind; even Mrs. Kirkman's hints had proved useless, so far as that was concerned. Such a thing seemed to her as impossible as to steal or to murder. When they were babies, a certain thrill of apprehension had moved her whenever she saw any antagonism

between the brothers; but when the moment of realizing it came, she was unable to conceive of such a horror. To think of Will harming Hugh! It was impossible—more than impossible; and thus as she drove through the unknown streets in the early bustle of the morning, towards the distant suburb in which Mr. Penrose lived, her thoughts rejected all tragical suppositions. The interview would be painful enough in any case, for it was hard for a mother to have to defend herself, and vindicate her good fame, to her boy; but still it could have been nothing but Will's horror at such a revelation—his alarm at the mere idea of such a suspicion ever becoming known to his mother—his sense of disenchantment in the entire world following his discovery, that made him go away: and this she had it in her power to dissipate for ever. This was how she was thinking as she approached Mr. Penrose's great mansion, looking out eagerly to see if any one might be visible at the windows. She saw no one, and her heart beat high as she looked up at the blank big house, and thought of the young heart that would flutter and perhaps sicken at the sight of her, and then expand into an infinite content. For by this time she had so reasoned herself into reassurance, and the light and breath of the morning had so invigorated her mind, that

she had no more doubt that her explanations would content him, and clear away every cloud from his thoughts, than she had of his being her son, and loyal as no son of hers could fail to be.

The servants did not make objections to her as they had done to Will. They admitted her to the cold, uninhabited drawing-room, and informed her that Mr. Penrose was out, but that young Mr. Ochterlony was certainly to be found. "Tell him it is his mother," said Mary, with her heart yearning over him; and then she sat down to wait. There was nothing after all in the emergency to tremble at. She smiled at herself when she thought of her own horrible apprehensions, and of the feelings with which she had hurried from the Cottage. It would be hard to speak of the suspicion to which she was subjected, but then she could set it to rest for ever: and what did the pang matter? Thus she sat with a wistful smile on her face, and waited. The moments passed, and she heard sounds of steps outside, and something that sounded like the hurried shutting of the great door; but no eager foot coming to meet her—no rapid entrance like that she had looked for. She sat still until the smile became rigid on her lip, and a wonderful depression came to her soul. Was he not coming? Could it be that he judged

her without hearing her, and would not see his mother? Then her heart woke up again when she heard some one approaching, but it was only the servant who had opened the door.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," said the man, with hesitation, "but it appears I made a mistake. Young Mr. Ochterlony was not—I mean he has gone out. Perhaps, if it was anything of importance, you could wait."

"He has gone out? so early?—surely not after he knew I was here?" said Mary, wildly; and then she restrained herself with an effort. "It *is* something of importance," she said, giving a groan in her heart, which was not audible. "I am his mother, and it is necessary that I should see him. Yes, I will wait; and if you could send some one to tell him, if you know where he is——"

"I should think, ma'am, he is sure to be home to luncheon," said the servant, evading this demand. To luncheon—and it was only about ten o'clock in the morning now. Mary clasped her hands together to keep herself from crying out. Could he have been out before she arrived—could he have fled to avoid her? She asked herself the question in a kind of agony; but Mr. Penrose's man stood blank and respectful at the door, and

offered no point of appeal. She could not take him into her counsel, or consult him as to what it all meant; and yet she was so anxious, so miserable, so heart-struck by this suspense, that she could not let him go without an effort to find something out.

"Has he gone with his uncle?" she said. "Perhaps I might find him at Mr. Penrose's office. No? Or perhaps you can tell me if there is any place he is in the habit of going to, or if he always goes out so early. I want very much to see him; I have been travelling all night; it is very important," Mary added, wistfully looking in the attendant's face.

Mr. Penrose's butler was very solemn and precise, but yet there was something in the sight of her restrained distress which moved him. "I don't know as I have remarked what time the young gentleman goes out," he said. "He's early this morning—mostly he varies a bit—but I don't make no doubt as he'll be in to luncheon." When he had said this the man did not go away, but stood with a mixture of curiosity and sympathy, sorry for the new-comer, and wondering what it all meant. If Mary herself could but have made out what it all meant! She turned away, with the blood, as she thought, all going

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[illegible] ...ing-room. She would not go out even to seek Will, lest she might miss him by the way. She went and sat down by the window, and gazed out upon the strip of suburban road which was visible through the shrubberies, feeling her heart beat when any figure, however unlike her boy, appeared upon it. It might be he, undiscernible in the distance, or it might be some one from him, some messenger or ambassador. It was what might be called a handsome room, but it was vacant, destitute of everything which could give it interest, with some trifling picture-books on the table and meaningless knick-nacks. When

Mrs. Ochterlony was sick of sitting watching at the window she would get up and walk round it, and look at the well-bound volumes on the table, and feel herself grow wild in the excess of her energy and vehemence, by contrast with the deadly calm of her surroundings. What was it to this house, or its master, or the other human creatures in it, that she was beating her wings thus, in the silence, against the cage? Thus she sat, or stood, or walked about, the whole long morning, counting the minutes on the time-piece or on her watch, and feeling every minute an hour. Where had he gone? had he fled to escape? or was his absence natural and accidental? These questions went through her head, one upon another, with increasing commotion and passion, until she found herself unable to rest, and felt her veins tingling and her pulses throbbing in a wild harmony. It seemed years since she had arrived when one o'clock struck, and a few minutes later the sound of a gong thrilled through the silence. This was for luncheon. It was not a bell, which might be heard outside and quickened the steps of any one who might be coming. Mary stood still and watched at her window, but nobody came. And then the butler, whose curiosity was more and more roused, came upstairs with steady step, and shoes that creaked

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It was all the more dreadful to her, because she had been totally unprepared for any such trial. It had never occurred to her that her boy, though he had run away, would avoid her now. By this time even the idea that he could be avoiding her went out of her mind, and she began to think some accident had happened to him. He was young and careless, a country boy and there was no telling what terrible thing might have happened on those thronged streets, which had felt like Pandemonium to Mary's un-

used faculties. And she did not know where to go to look for him, or what to do. In her terror she began to question the man, who kept coming and going into the room, sometimes venturing to invite her attention to the dishes, which were growing cold, sometimes merely looking at her, as he went and came. She asked about her boy —what he had been doing since he came—if he were not in the habit of going to his uncle's office—if he had made any acquaintances—if there was anything that could account for his absence? "Perhaps he went out sight-seeing," said Mary; "perhaps he is with his uncle at the office. He was always very fond of shipping." But she got very doubtful and hesitating replies —replies which were so uncertain that fear blazed up within her; and the slippery docks and dangerous water, the great carts in the streets and the string of carriages, came up before her eyes again.

Thus the time passed till it was evening. Mary could not, or rather would not, believe her own senses, and yet it was true. Shadows stole into the corners, and a star, which it made her heart sick to see, peeped out in the green-blue sky—and she went from one room to another, watching the two bits of road. First the one opening, which was fainter and farther off,

then the other, which was overshadowed by the trees, yet visible and near. Every time she changed the point of watching, she felt sure that he must be coming. But yet the stars peeped out, and the lamps were lighted on the road, and her boy did not appear. She was a woman used to self-restraint, and but for her flitting up and down stairs, and the persistent way she kept by the window, the servants might not have noticed anything remarkable about her; but they had all possession of one fact which quickened their curiosity—and the respectable butler prowled about watching her, in a way which would have irritated Mrs. Ochterlony, had she been at sufficient leisure in her mind to remark him. When the time came that the lamp must be lighted and the windows closed, it went to her heart like a blow. She had to reason to herself that her watch could make no difference—could not bring him a moment sooner or later—and yet to be shut out from that one point of interest was hard. They told her Mr. Penrose was expected immediately, and that no doubt the young gentleman would be with him. To see Will only in his uncle's presence was not what Mary had been thinking of—but yet it was better than this suspense; and now that her eyes could serve her no longer, she sat listening,

feeling every sound echo in her brain, and herself surrounded, as it were, by a rustle of passing feet and a roll of carriages that came and passed and brought nothing to her. And the house was so still and vacant, and resounded with every movement—even with her own foot, as she changed her seat, though her foot had always been so light. That day's watching had made a change upon her, which a year under other circumstances would not have made. Her brow was contracted with lines unknown to its broad serenity; her eyes looked out eagerly from the lids which had grown curved and triangular with anxiety; her mouth was drawn together and colourless. The long, speechless, vacant day, with no occupation in it but that of watching and listening, with its sense of time lost and opportunity deferred, with its dreadful suggestion of other things and thoughts which might be making progress and nourishing harm, while she sat here impeded and helpless, and unable to prevent it, was perhaps the severest ordeal Mary could have passed through. It was the same day on which Winnie went to Carlisle—it was the same evening on which Hugh received Nelly's letter, which found his mother motionless in Mr. Penrose's drawing-room, waiting. This was the hardest of all, and yet not so hard as it might have been.

For she did not know, what all the servants in the house knew, that Will had seen her arrive—that he had rushed out of the house, begging the man to deceive her—that he had kept away all day, not of necessity, but because he did not dare to face her. Mary knew nothing of this; but it was hard enough to contend with the thousand spectres that surrounded her, the fears of accident, the miserable suspense, the dreary doubt and darkness that seemed to hang over everything, as she waited ever vainly in the silence for her boy's return.

When some one arrived at the door, her heart leaped so into her throat that she felt herself suffocated; she had to put her hands to her side and clasp them there to support herself as footsteps came up the stair. She grew sick, and a mist came over her eyes; and then all at once she saw clearly, and fell back, fainting in the body, horribly conscious and alive in the mind, when she saw it was Mr. Penrose, who came in alone.



CHAPTER XII.

WILL had seen his mother arrive. He was coming downstairs at the moment, and he heard her voice, and could hear her say, "Tell him it is his mother," and fright had seized him. If only three days could have been abrogated, and he could have gone to her in his old careless way, to demand an account of why she had come!—but there stood up before him a ghost of what he had been doing—a ghost of uncomprehended harm and mischief, which now for the first time showed to him, not in its real light, but still with an importance it had never taken before. If it had been hard to tell her of the discovery he had made before he left the Cottage, it was twenty times harder now, when he had discussed it with other people, and taken practical steps about it. He went out hurriedly, and with a sense of stealth and panic. And the panic and

the stealth were signs to him of something wrong. He had not seen it, and did not see it yet, as regarded the original question. He knew in his heart that there was no favouritism in Mrs. Ochterlony's mind, and that he was just the same to her as Hugh—and what could it matter which of her sons had Earlston?—But still, nature was stronger in him than reason, and he was ashamed and afraid to meet her, though he did not know why. He hurried out, and said to himself that she was "angry," and that he could not stay in all day long to be scolded. He would go back to luncheon, and that would be time enough. And then he began to imagine what she would say to him. But that was not so easy. What could she say? After all, he had done no harm. He had but intimated to Hugh, in the quietest way, that he had no right to the position he was occupying. He had made no disturbance about it, nor upbraided his brother for what was not his brother's fault. And so far from blaming his mother, it had not occurred to him to consider her in the matter, except in the most secondary way. What could it matter to her? If Will had it, or if Hugh had it, it was still in the family. And the simple transfer was nothing to make any fuss about. This was how he reasoned; but Nature held a different opinion upon the

subject. She had not a word to say, nor any distinct suggestion even, of guiltiness or wrong-doing to present to his mind. She only carried him away out of the house, made him shrink aside till Mary had passed, and made him walk at the top of his speed out of the very district in which Mr. Penrose's house was situated. Because his mother would be "angry"—because she might find fault with him for going away or insist upon his return, or infringe his liberty. Was that why he fled from her?—But Will could not tell—he fled because he was driven by an internal consciousness which could not find expression so much as in thought. He went away and wandered about the streets, thinking that now he was almost a man, and ought to be left to direct his own actions; that to come after him like this was an injury to him which he had a right to resent. It was treating him as Hugh and Islay had never been treated. When he laid himself out for these ideas they came to him one by one, and at last he succeeded in feeling himself a little ill-used; but in his heart he knew that he did not mean that, and that Mrs. Ochterlony did not mean it, and that there was something else which stood between them, though he could not tell what it was.

All this time he contemplated going in, facing

his mother, and being surprised to see her, and putting up with her anger as he best could. But when midday came, he felt less willing than ever. His reluctance grew upon him. If it had all come simply, if he had rushed into her presence unawares, then he could have borne it; but to go back on purpose, to be ushered in to her solemnly, and to meet her when her wrath had accumulated and she had prepared what to say—this was an ordeal which Will felt he could not bear. She had grown terrible to him, appalling, like the angel with the flaming sword. His conscience arrayed her in such effulgence of wrath and scorn, that his very soul shrank. She would be angry beyond measure. It was impossible to fancy what she might say or do; and he could not go in and face her in cold blood. Therefore, instead of going home, Will went down hastily to his uncle's office, and explained to him the position of affairs. "You go and speak to her," said Will, with a feeling that it was his accomplice he was addressing, and yet a pang to think that he had himself gone over to the enemy, and was not on his natural side; "I am not up to seeing her to-night."

"Poor Mary," said Uncle Penrose, "I should not be surprised to find her in a sad way; but

you ought to mind your own business, and it is not I who am to be blamed, but you."

"She will not blame you," said Will; "she will be civil to you. She will not look at you as she would look at me. When she is vexed she gives a fellow such a look. And I'm tired, and I can't face her to-day."

"It is mail-day, and I shall be late, and she will have a nice time of it all by herself," said Mr. Penrose; but he consented at the end. And as for Will, he wandered down to the quays, and got into a steam-boat, and went off in the midst of a holiday party up the busy river. He used to remember the airs that were played on the occasion by the blind fiddler in the boat, and could never listen to them afterwards without the strangest sensations. He felt somehow as if he were in hiding, and the people were pointing him out to each other, and had a sort of vague wonder in his mind as to what they could think he had done—robbed or killed, or something—when the fact was he was only killing the time, and keeping out of the way because his mother was angry, and he did not feel able to face her and return home. And very forlorn the poor boy was; he had not eaten anything, and he did not know what to get for

himself to eat, and the host of holiday people filled up all the vacant spaces in the inn they were all bound for, where there were pretty gardens looking on the river. Will was young and alone, and not much in the way of thrusting himself forward, and it was hard to get any one to attend to him, or a seat to sit upon, or anything to eat; and his forlorn sense of discomfort and solitude pressed as hardly upon him as remorse could have done. And he knew that he must manage to make the time pass on somehow, and that he could not return until he could feel himself justified in hoping that his mother, tired with her journey, had gone to rest. Not till he felt confident of getting in unobserved, could he venture to go home.

This was how it happened that Mr. Penrose went in alone, and that all the mists suddenly cleared up for Mary, and she saw that she had harder work before her than anything that had yet entered into her mind. He drew a chair beside her, and shook hands, and said he was very glad to see her, and then a pause ensued so serious and significant, that Mary felt herself judged and condemned; and felt, in spite of herself, that the hot blood was rushing to her face. It seemed to her as she sat there, as if all the solid ground had suddenly been cut away

from under her, that her plea was utterly ignored and the whole affair decided upon; and only to see Uncle Penrose's meekly averted face made her head swim and her heart beat with a kind of half-delirious rage and resentment. He believed it then—knew all about it, and believed it, and recognised that it was a fallen woman by whose side he sat. All this Mrs. Ochterlony perceived in an instant by the downcast, conscious glance of Mr. Penrose's eye.

"Will has been out all day, has he?" he said. "Gone sight-seeing, I suppose. He ought to be in to dinner. I hope you had a comfortable luncheon, and have been taken care of. It is mail-day, that is why I am so late."

"But I am anxious, very anxious, about Will," said Mary. "I thought you would know where he was. He is only a country boy, and something may have happened to him in these dreadful streets."

"Oh no, nothing has happened to him," said Uncle Penrose, "You shall see him later. I am very glad you have come, for I wanted to have a little talk with you. You will always be quite welcome here, whatever may happen. If the girls had been at home, indeed, it might have been different—but whenever you like to come, you know——I am very glad that we can talk

it all over. It is so much the most satisfactory way."

"Talk what over?" said Mary. "Thank you, uncle, but it was Will I was anxious to see."

"Yes, to be sure—naturally," said Mr. Penrose; "but don't let us go into anything exciting before dinner. The gong will sound in ten minutes, and I must put myself in order. We can talk in the evening, and that will be much the best."

With this he went and left her, to make the very small amount of toilette he considered necessary. And then came the dinner, during which Mr. Penrose was very particular, as he said, to omit all allusion to disagreeable subjects. Mary had to take her place at table, and to look across at the vacant chair that had been placed for Will, and to feel the whole weight of her uncle's changed opinion, without any opportunity of rising up against it. She could not say a word in self-defence, for she was in no way assailed; but she never raised her eyes to him, nor listened to half-a-dozen words, without feeling that Mr. Penrose had in his own consciousness found her out. He was not going to shut his doors against her, or to recommend any cruel step. But her character was changed in his eyes. A sense

that he was no longer particular as to what he said or did before her, no longer influenced by her presence, or elevated ever so little by her companionship as he had always been of old, came with terrible effect upon Mary's mind. He was careless of what he said, and of her feelings, and of his own manners. She was a woman who had compromised herself, who had no longer much claim to respect, in Uncle Penrose's opinion. This feeling, which was, as it were, in the air, affected Mary in the strangest way. It made her feel nearly mad in her extreme suppression and quietness. She could not stand on her own defence, for she was not assailed. And Will who should have stood by her, had gone over to the enemy's side, and deserted her, and kept away. Where was he? where could he have gone? Her boy—her baby—the last one, who had always been the most tenderly tended; and he was avoiding—*avoiding* his mother. Mary realized all this as she sat at the table; and at the same time she had to respect the presence of the butler and Mr. Penrose's servants, and make no sign. When she did not eat Mr. Penrose took particular notice of it, and hoped that she was not allowing herself to be upset; and he talked, in an elaborate way, of subjects that

could interest nobody, keeping with too evident caution from the one subject which was in his mind all the while.

This lasted until the servants had gone away, and Mr. Penrose had poured out his first glass of port, for he was an old-fashioned man. He sat and sipped his wine with the quietness of preparation, and Mary, too, buckled on her armour, and made a rapid inspection of all its joints and fastenings. She was sitting at the table, which had just been so luxuriously served, and where the purple fruit and wine were making a picture still; but she was as truly at the bar as ever culprit was. There was an interval of silence, which was very dreadful to her, and then, being unable to bear it any longer, it was Mary herself who spoke.

"I perceive that something has been passing here in which we are all interested," she said. "My poor boy has told you something he had heard—and I don't know, except in the most general way, what he has heard. Can you tell me, uncle? It is necessary I should know."

"My dear Mary, these are very unpleasant affairs to talk about," said Mr. Penrose. "You should have had a female friend to support you—though, indeed, I don't know how you may feel

about that. Will has told me *all*. There was nobody he could ask advice from under the circumstances, and I think it was very sensible of him to come to me."

"I want to know what he wanted advice for," said Mary, "and what it is you call *all*; and why Will has avoided me? I cannot think it is chance that has kept him out so long. Whatever he has heard, he must have known that it would be best to talk it over with me."

"He thought you would be angry," said Mr. Penrose, between the sips of his wine.

"Angry!" said Mary, and then her heart melted at the childish fear. "Oh, uncle, you should have advised him better," she said, "he is only a boy; and you know that whatever happened, he had better have consulted his own mother first. How should I be angry? This is not like a childish freak, that one could be angry about."

"No," said Mr. Penrose; "it is not like a childish freak; but still I think it was the wisest thing he could do to come to me. It is impossible you could be his best counsellor where you are yourself so much concerned, and where such important interests are at stake."

"Let me know at once what you mean," said Mary, faintly. "What important interests are at stake?"

She made a rapid calculation in her mind at the moment, and her heart grew sicker and sicker. Will had been, when she came to think of it, more than a week away from home, and many things might have happened in that time—things which she could not realize nor put in any shape, but which made her spirit faint out of her and all her strength ooze away.

"My dear Mary," said Mr. Penrose, mildly, "why should you keep up any pretence with me? Will has told me *all*. You cannot expect that a young man like him, at the beginning of his life, would relinquish his rights and give up such a fine succession merely out of consideration to your feelings. I am very sorry for you, and he is very sorry. Nothing shall be done on our part to compromise you beyond what is absolutely necessary; but your unfortunate circumstances are not his fault, and it is only reasonable that he should claim his rights."

"What are his rights?" said Mary; "what do you suppose my unfortunate circumstances to be? Speak plainly—or, stop; I will tell you what he has heard. He has heard that my husband and I were married in India before he was born. That is quite true; and I suppose he and you think——" said Mary, coming to a sudden gasp for breath, and making a pause

against her will. "Then I will tell you the facts," she said, with a labouring, long-drawn breath, when she was able to resume. "We were married in Scotland, as you and everybody know; it was not a thing done in secret. Everybody about Kirtell—everybody in the county knew of it. We went to Earlston afterwards, where Hugh's mother was, and to Aunt Agatha. There was no shame or concealment anywhere, and you know that. We went out to India after, but not till we had gone to see all our friends; and everybody knew——"

"My wife even asked you here," said Mr. Penrose, reflectively. "It is very extraordinary; I mentioned all that to Will: but, my dear Mary, what is the use of going over it in this way, when there is this fact, which you don't deny, which proves that Hugh Ochterlony thought it necessary to do you justice at the last?"

Mary was too much excited to feel either anger or shame. The colour scarcely deepened on her cheek. "I will tell you about that," she said. "I resisted it as long as it was possible to resist. The man at Gretna died, and his house and all his records were burnt, and the people were all dead who had been present, and I had lost the lines. I did not think them of

any consequence. And then my poor Hugh was seized with a panic—you remember him, uncle," said Mary, in her excitement, with the tears coming to her eyes. "My poor Hugh! how much he felt everything, how hard it was for him to be calm and reasonable when he thought our interests concerned. I have thought since, he had some presentiment of what was going to happen. He begged me for his sake to consent that he might be sure there would be no difficulty about the pension or anything. It was like dragging my heart out of my breast," said Mary, with the tears dropping on her hands, "but I yielded to please *him*."

And then there was a pause, inevitable on her part, for her heart was full, and she had lost the faculty of speech. As for Mr. Penrose, he gave quiet attention to all she was saying, and made mental notes of it while he filled himself another glass of wine. He was not an impartial listener, for he had taken his side, and had the conducting of the other case in his hands. When Mary came to herself, and could see and hear again—when her heart was not beating so wildly in her ears, and her wet eyes had shed their moisture, she gave a look at him with a kind of wonder, marvelling that he said nothing. The idea of not being believed when she spoke

was one which had never entered into her mind.

"You expect me to say something," said Mr. Penrose, when he caught her eye. "But I don't see what I can say. All that you have told me just amounts to this, that your first marriage rests upon your simple assertion; you have no documentary or any other kind of evidence. My dear Mary, I don't want to hurt your feelings, but if you consider how strong is your interest in it, what a powerful motive you have to keep up that story, and that you confess it rests on your word alone, you will see that, as Wilfrid's adviser, I am not justified in departing from the course we have taken. It is too important to be decided by mere feeling. I am very sorry for you, but I have Wilfrid's interests to think of," said Mr. Penrose, slowly swallowing his glass of wine.

Mary looked at him aghast; she did not understand him. It seemed to her as if some delusion had taken possession of her mind, and that the words conveyed a meaning which no human words could bear. "I do not understand you," she said; "I suppose there is some mistake. What course is it you have taken? I want to know what you mean."

"It is not a matter to be discussed with you,"

said Mr. Penrose. "Whatever happens I would not be forgetful of a lady's feelings. From the first I have said that it must be a matter of private arrangement; and I have no doubt Hugh will see it in the same light. I have written to him, but I have not yet received a satisfactory answer. Under all the circumstances I feel we are justified in asserting Wilfrid to be Major Ochterlony's only lawful son——"

An involuntary cry came out of Mary's breast. She pushed her chair away from the table, and sat bending forward, looking at him. The pang was partly physical, as if some one had thrust a spear into her heart; and beyond that convulsive motion she could neither move nor speak.

"—and of course he must be served heir to his uncle," said Mr. Penrose. "Where things so important are concerned, you cannot expect that feeling can be allowed to bear undue sway. It is in this light that Wilfrid sees it. He is ready to do anything for you, anything for his brother; but he cannot be expected to sacrifice his legal rights. I hope Hugh will see how reasonable this is, and I think for your own sake you should use your influence with him. If he makes a stand, you know it will only ruin your character, and make everybody aware of the un-

happy position of affairs; and it cannot do any good to him."

Mary heard all this and a great deal more, and sat stupefied with a dull look of wonder on her face, making no reply. She thought she had formed some conception of what was coming to her, but in reality she had no conception of it; and she sat listening, coming to an understanding, taking it painfully into her mind, learning to see that it had passed out of the region of what might be—that the one great, fanciful, possible danger of her life had developed into a real danger, more dreadful, more appalling than anything she had ever conceived of. She sat thus, with her chair thrust back, looking in Mr. Penrose's face, following with her eyes all his unconcerned movements, feeling his words beat upon her ears like a stinging rain. And this was all true; love, honour, pride, or faith had nothing to do with it. Whether she was a wretched woman, devising a lie to cover her shame, or a pure wife telling her tale with lofty truth and indignation, mattered nothing. It was in this merciless man's hand, and nothing but merciless evidence and proof would be of any use. She sat and listened to him, hearing the same words over and over; that her feelings were to be considered; that nothing was to be

done to expose her: that Will had consented to that and was anxious for that; that it must be matter of private arrangement, and that her character must be spared. It was this decision that roused Mary, and brought her back, as it were, out of her stupefaction into life.

"I do not understand all you are saying," she said, at last: "it sounds like a horrible dream: I feel as if you could not mean it: but one thing—do you mean that Hugh is to be made to give up his rights, by way of sparing me?"

"By way of sparing a public trial and exposure—which is what it must come to otherwise," said Mr. Penrose. "I don't know, poor boy, how you can talk about his rights."

"Then listen to me," said Mary, rising up, and holding by her chair to support herself; "I may be weak, but I am not like that. My boy shall not give up his rights. I know what I am saying; if there should be twenty trials, I am ready to bear them. It shall be proved whether in England a true woman cannot tell her true story, and be believed. Neither lie nor shame has ever attached to me. If I have to see my own child brought against me—God forgive you!—I will try to bear it. My poor Will! my poor Will!—but Hugh's boy shall not be sacrificed. What! my husband, my son, my

own honour—a woman's honour involves all belonging to her—— Do you think *I*, for the sake of pain or exposure, would give them all up? It must be that you have gone out of your senses, and don't know what you say. *I*, to save myself at my son's expense!"

"But Wilfrid is your son too," said Mr. Penrose, shrinking somewhat into himself.

"Oh, my poor Will! my poor Will!" said Mary, moaning in her heart; and after that she went away, and left the supporter of Will's cause startled, but not moved from his intention, by himself. As for Mrs. Ochterlony, she went up into her room, and sank down into the first chair that offered, and clasped her hands over her heart lest it should break forth from the aching flesh. She thought no more of seeing Will, or of telling him her story, or delivering him from his delusion. What she thought of was, to take him into her arms in an infinite pity, when the poor boy, who did not know what he was doing, should come to himself. And Hugh—Hugh her husband, who was thought capable of such wrong and baseness—Hugh her boy, whose name and fame were to be taken from him,—and they thought she would yield to it, to save herself a pang! When she came to remember that the night was passing, and to feel the chill that had crept over

her, and to recall to herself that she must not exhaust her strength, Mary paused in her thoughts, and fell upon her knees instead. Even that was not enough; she fell prostrate, as one who would have fallen upon the Deliverer's feet; but she could say no prayer. Her heart itself seemed at last to break forth, and soar up out of her, in a speechless supplication—"Let this cup pass!" Did He not say it once who had a heavier burden to bear?



CHAPTER XIII.

SO very late it was when Will came in, that he crept up to his room with a silent stealth which felt more like ill-doing to him than any other sin he had been guilty of. He crept to his room, though he would have been glad to have lingered, and warmed himself and been revived with food. But, at the end of this long, wretched day, he was more than ever unfit to face his mother, who he felt sure must be watching for him, watchful and unwearied as she always had been. It did not occur to him that Mrs. Ochterlony, insensible for the moment to all sounds, was lying enveloped in darkness, with her eyes open, and all her faculties at work, and nothing but pain, pain, ever, forever, in her mind. That she could be wound up to a pitch of emotion so great that she would not have heard whatever noise he might have made, that

she would not have heeded him, that he was safe to go and come as he liked, so far as Mary was concerned, was an idea that never entered Will's mind. He stole in, and went softly up the stairs, and swallowed the glass of wine the butler compassionately brought him, without even saying a word of thanks. He was chilled to his bones, and his head ached, and a sense of confused misery was in all his frame. He crept into his bed like a savage, in the dark, seeking warmth, seeking forgetfulness, and hiding; so long as he could be hid, it did not matter. His mother could not come in with the light in her hand to stand by his bedside, and drive all ghosts and terrors away, for he had locked the door in his panic. No deliverance could come to him, as it seemed, any way. If she was "angry" before, what must she be now when he had fled and avoided her? and poor Will lay breathing hard in the dark, wondering within himself why it was he dared not face his mother. What had he done? Instead of having spent the day in his usual fashion, why was he weary, and footsore, and exhausted, and sick in body and in mind? He had meant her no harm, he had done no wrong he knew of. It was only a confused, unintelligible weight on his conscience, or rather on his consciousness,

that bowed him down, and made him do things which he did not understand. He went to sleep at last, for he was young and weary, and nothing could have kept him from sleeping; but he had a bad night. He dreamed dreadful dreams, and in the midst of them all saw Mary, always Mary, threatening him, turning away from him, leaving him to fall over precipices and into perils. He started up a dozen times in the course of that troubled night, waking to a confused sense of solitude, and pain, and abandonment, which in the dark and the silence were very terrible to bear. He was still only a boy, and he had done wrong, dreadful wrong, and he did not know what it was.

In the morning when Will woke things were not much better. He was utterly unrefreshed by his night's rest—if the partial unconsciousness of his sleep could be called rest; and the thought he woke to was, that however she might receive him, to-day he must see his mother. She might be, probably was, "angry," beyond anything he could conceive; but however that might be, he must see her and meet her wrath. It was not until he had fully realized that thought, that a letter was brought to Will, which increased his excitement. It was a very unusual thing for him to get letters, and he was startled accord-

ingly. He turned it over and over before he opened it, and thought it must be from Hugh. Hugh, too, must have adopted the plan of pouring out his wrath against his brother for want of any better defence to make. But then he perceived that the writing was not Hugh's. When he opened it Will grew pale, and then he grew red. It was a letter which Nelly Askell had written before she wrote the one to Hugh, which had roused him out of his despondency. Something had inspired the little girl that day. She had written this too, like the other, without very much minding what she meant. This is what Will read upon the morning of the day which he already felt to be in every description a day of fate :—

"Will !

"I don't think I can ever call you dear Will again, or think of you as I used to do —oh, Will, what are you doing? If I had been you I would have been tied to the stake, torn with wild horses, done anything to that used to be done to people, rather than turn against my mother. *I* would have done that for *my* mother, and if I had had yours ! Oh, Will, say you don't mean it ! I think sometimes you can't mean it, but have got deluded somehow, for you know

you have a bad temper. How could you ever believe it? She is not my mother, but I know she never did any wrong. She may have sinned perhaps, as people say everybody sins, but she could never have done any *wrong;* look in her face, and just try whether you can believe it. It is one comfort to me that if you mean to be so wicked (which I cannot believe of you), and were to win (which is not possible), you would never more have a day's happiness again. I *hope* you would never have a day's happiness. You would break her heart, for she is a woman, and though you would not break *his* heart, you would put his life all wrong, and it would haunt you, and you would pray to be poor, or a beggar, or anything rather than in a place that does not belong to you. You may think I don't know, but I do know. I am a woman, and understand things better than a boy like you. Oh, Will! we used to be put in the same cradle, and dear Mrs. Ochterlony used to nurse us both when we were babies. Sometimes I think I should have been your sister. If you will come back and put away all this which is too dreadful to think of, I will never more bring it up against you. I for one will forget it, as if it had never been. Nobody shall put it into your mind again. We will forgive you, and love you the same as ever;

and when you are a man, and understand and see what it is you have been saved from, you will go down on your knees and thank God.

"If I had been old enough to travel by myself, or to be allowed to do what I like, I should have gone to Liverpool too, to have given you no excuse. It is not so easy to write; but oh, Will, you know what I mean. Come back, and let us forget that you were ever so foolish and so wicked. I could cry when I think of you all by yourself, and nobody to tell you what is right. Come back, and nobody shall ever bring it up against you. Dear Will! don't you love us all too well to make us unhappy?

"Still your affectionate

"NELLY."

This letter startled the poor boy, and affected him in a strange way. It brought the tears to his eyes. It touched him somehow, not by its reproaches, but by the thought that Nelly cared. She had gone over to Hugh's side like all the rest—and yet she cared and took upon her that right of reproach and accusation which is more tender than praise. And it made Will's heart ache in a dull way to see that they all thought him wicked. What had he done that was wicked? He ached, poor boy, not only in

his heart but in his head, and all over him. He did not get up even to read his letter, but lay in a kind of sad stupor all the morning, wondering if his mother was still in the house —wondering if she would come to him—wondering if she was so angry that she no longer desired to see him. The house was more quiet than usual, he thought—there was no stir in it of voices or footsteps. Perhaps Mrs. Ochterlony had gone away again—perhaps he was to be left here, having got Uncle Penrose on his side, to his sole company—excommunicated and cast off by his own. Wilfrid lay pondering all these thoughts till he could bear it no longer; instead of his pain and shrinking a kind of dogged resistance came into his mind; at least he would go and face it, and see what was to happen to him. He would go downstairs and find out, to begin with, what this silence meant.

Perhaps it was just because it was so much later than usual that he felt as if he had been ill when he got up—felt his limbs trembling under him, and shivered, and grew hot and cold —or perhaps it was the fatigue and mental commotion of yesterday. By this time he felt sure that his mother must be gone. Had she been in the house she would have come to see

him. She would have seized the opportunity when he could not escape from her. No doubt she was gone, after waiting all yesterday for him,—gone either hating him or scorning him, casting him off from her; and he felt that he had not deserved that. Perhaps he might have deserved that Hugh should turn his enemy—notwithstanding that, even for Hugh he felt himself ready to do anything—but to his mother he had done no harm. He had meditated nothing but good to her. *He* would not have thought of marrying, or giving to any one but her the supreme place in his house. He would never have asked her or made any doubt about it, but taken her at once to Earlston, and showed her everything there arranged according to her liking. This was what Will had always intended and settled upon. And his mother, for whom he would have done all this, had gone away again, offended and angry, abandoning him to his own devices. Bitterness took possession of his soul as he thought of it. He meant it only for their good—for justice and right, and to have his own; and this was the cruel way in which they received it, as if he had done it out of unkind feelings—even Nelly! A sense that he was wronged came into Wilfrid's mind as he dressed himself, and looked at his pale face in the glass, and smoothed

his brown long hair. And yet he stepped out of his room with the feelings of one who ventures upon an undiscovered country, a new region, in which he does not know whether he is to meet with good or evil. He had to support himself by the rail as he went downstairs. He hesitated and trembled at the drawing-room door, which was a room Mr. Penrose never occupied. Breakfast must be over long ago. If there was any lady in the house, no doubt she would be found there.

He put his hand on the door, but it was a minute or more before he could open it, and he heard no sound within. No doubt she had gone away. He had walked miles yesterday to avoid her, but yet his heart was sore and bled, and he felt deserted and miserable to think that she was gone. But when Will had opened the door, the sight he saw was more wonderful to him than if she had been gone. Mary was seated at the table writing: she was pale, but there was something in her face which told of unusual energy and resolution, a kind of inspiration which gave character to every movement she made. And she was so much preoccupied, that she showed no special excitement at sight of her boy; she stopped and put away her pen, and rose up looking at him with pitiful

eyes. "My poor boy!" she said, and kissed him in her tender way. And then she sat down at the table, and went back to her letters again.

It was not simple consternation which struck Will; it was a mingled pang of wonder and humiliation and sharp disappointment. Only her poor boy!—only the youngest, the child as he had always been, not the young revolutionary to whom Nelly had written that letter, whom Mrs. Ochterlony had come anxious and in haste to seek. She was more anxious now about her letters apparently than about him, and there was nothing but tenderness and sorrow in her eyes; and when she did raise her head again, it was to remark his paleness and ask if he was tired. "Go and get some breakfast, Will," she said; but he did not care for breakfast. He had not the heart to move—he sat in the depths of boyish mortification and looked at her writing her letters. Was that all that it mattered? or was she only making a pretence at indifference? But Mary was too much occupied evidently for any pretence. Her whole figure and attitude were full of resolution. Notwithstanding the pity of her voice as she addressed him, and the longing look in her eyes, there was something in her which Wilfrid had never seen before, which revealed to him in a

kind of dull way that his mother was wound up to some great emergency, that she had taken a great resolution, and was occupied by matters of life and death.

"You are very busy, it seems," he said, peevishly, when he had sat for some time watching her, wondering when she would speak to him. To find that she was not angry, that she had something else to think about, was not half so great a relief as it appeared.

"Yes, I am busy," said Mary. "I am writing to your brother, Will, and to some people who know all about me, and I have no time to lose. Your uncle Penrose is a hard man, and I am afraid he will be hard on Hugh."

"No, mother," said Will, feeling his heart beat quick; "he shall not be hard upon Hugh. I want to tell you that. I want to have justice; but for anything else—Hugh shall have whatever he wishes; and as for you——"

"Oh, Will," said Mrs. Ochterlony; and somehow it seemed to poor Will's disordered imagination that she and his letter were speaking together—"I had almost forgotten that you had anything to do with it. If you had but come first and spoken to me——"

"Why should I have come and spoken to you?" said Will, growing into gradual excite-

ment; "it will not do you any harm. I am your son as well as Hugh—if it is his or if it is mine, what does it matter? I knew you would be angry if I stood up for myself; but a man must stand up for himself when he knows what are his rights."

"Will, you must listen to me," said Mary, putting away her papers, and turning round to him. "It is Mr. Penrose who has put all this in your head: it could not be my boy that had such thoughts. Oh, Will! my poor child! And now we are in his pitiless hands," said Mary, with a kind of cry, "and it matters nothing what you say or what I say. You have put yourself in his hands."

"Stop, mother," said Will; "don't make such a disturbance about it. Uncle Penrose has nothing to do with it. It is my doing. I will do anything in the world for you, whatever you like to tell me; but I wont let a fellow be there who has no right to be there. I am the heir, and I will have my rights."

"You are not the heir," said Mrs. Ochterlony, frightened for the moment by his tone and his vehemence, and his strange looks.

"I heard it from two people that were both *there*," said Will, with a gloomy composure. "It was not without asking about it. I am not

blaming you, mother — you might have some reason;—but it was I that was born after that thing that happened in India. What is the use of struggling against it? And if it is I that am the heir, why should you try to keep me out of my rights?"

"Will," said Mary, suddenly driven back into regions of personal emotion, which she thought she had escaped from, and falling by instinct into those wild weaknesses of personal argument to which women resort when they are thus suddenly stung. "Will, look me in the face and tell me, Can you believe your dear father, who was true as—as heaven itself; can you believe me, who never told you a lie, to have been such wretched deceivers? Can you think we were so wicked? Will, look me in the face!"

"Mother," said Will, whose mind was too little imaginative to be moved by this kind of argument, except to a kind of impatience. "What does it matter my looking you in the face? what does it matter about my father being true? You might have some reason for it. I am not blaming you; but so long as it was a fact what does *that* matter? I don't want to injure any one—I only want my rights."

It was Mary's turn now to be struck dumb. She had thought he was afraid of her, and had

fled from her out of shame for what he had done; but he looked in her face as she told him with unhesitating frankness, and even that touch of impatience as of one whose common sense was proof to all such appeals. For her own part, when she was brought back to it, she felt the effect of the dreadful shock she had received; and she could not discuss this matter reasonably with her boy. Her mind fell off into a mingled anguish and horror and agonized sense of his sin and pity for him. "Oh, Will, your rights," she cried; "your rights! Your rights are to be forgiven and taken back, and loved and pitied, though you do not understand what love is. These are all the rights you have. You are young, and you do not know what you are doing. You have still a right to be forgiven."

"I was not asking to be forgiven," said Will, doggedly. "I have done no harm. I never said a word against you. I will give Hugh whatever he likes to get himself comfortably out in the world. I don't want to make any fuss or hurry. It can be quietly managed, if he will; but it's me that Earlston ought to come to; and I am not going to be driven out of it by talk. I should just like to know what Hugh would do if he was in my place."

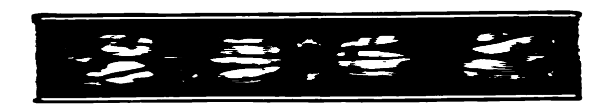
"Hugh could never have been in your place,"

cried Mary, in her anguish and indignation. "I ought to have seen this is what it would come to. I ought to have known when I saw your jealous temper, even when you were a baby. Oh, my little Will! How will you ever bear it when you come to your senses, and know what it is you have been doing? Slandering your dear father's name and mine, though all the world knows different—and trying to supplant your brother, your elder brother, who has always been good to you. God forgive them that have brought my boy to this," said Mary, with tears. She kept gazing at him, even with her eyes full. It did not seem possible that he could be insensible to her look, even if he was insensible to her words.

Wilfrid, for his part, got up and began to walk about the room. It *was* hard, very hard to meet his mother's eyes. "When she is vexed, she gives a fellow such a look." He remembered those words which he had said to Uncle Penrose only yesterday with a vague sort of recollection. But when he got up his own bodily sensations somehow gave him enough to do. He half forgot about his mother in the strange feeling he had in his physical frame, as if his limbs did not belong to him, nor his head either for that part, which seemed to be floating about in the air, without any particular connexion with the rest

of him. It must be that he was so very tired, for when he sat down and clutched at the arms of his chair, he seemed to come out of his confusion and see Mrs. Ochterlony again, and know what she had been talking about. He said, with something that looked like sullenness: "Nobody brought me to this — I brought myself," in answer to what she had said, and fell, as it were, into a moody reverie, leaning upon the arms of his chair. Mary saw it, and thought it was that attitude of obstinate and immovable resolve into which she had before seen him fall; and she dried her eyes with a little flash of indignation, and turned again to the half-finished letter which trembled in her hands, and which she could not force her mind back to. She said to herself in a kind of despair, that the bitter cup must be drunk—that there was nothing for it but to do battle for her son's rights, and lose no time in vain outcries, but forgive the unhappy boy when he came to his right mind and returned to her again. She turned away, with her heart throbbing and bleeding, and made an effort to recover her composure and finish her letter. It was a very important letter, and required all her thoughts. But if it had been hard to do it before, it was twenty times harder now.

Just at that moment there was a commotion at the door, and a sound of some one entering below. It might be only Mr. Penrose coming back, as he sometimes did, to luncheon. But every sound tingled through Mrs. Ochterlony in the excitement of her nerves. Then there came something that made her spring to her feet—a single tone of a voice struck on her ear, which she thought could only be her own fancy. But it was not her fancy. Some one came rushing up the stairs, and dashed into the room. Mary gave a great cry, and ran into his arms, and Will, startled and roused up from a sudden oblivion which he did not understand, drew his hand across his heavy eyes, and looked up doubting, and saw Hugh—Hugh standing in the middle of the room holding his mother, glowing with fresh air, and health, and gladness. —Hugh! How did he come there? Poor Will tried to rise from his chair, but with a feeling that he was fixed in it for ever, like the lady in the fable. Had he been asleep? and where was he? Had it been but a bad dream, and was this the Cottage, and Hugh come home to see them all? These were the questions that rose in Will's darkened mind, as he woke up and drew his hand across his heavy eyes, and sat as if glued in Mr. Penrose's chair.



CHAPTER XV.

MRS. OCHTERLONY was almost as much confused and as uncertain of her own feelings as Will was. Her heart gave a leap towards her son; but yet there was that between them which put pain into even a meeting with Hugh. When she had seen him last, she had been all that a spotless mother is to a youth—his highest standard, his most perfect type of woman. Now, though he would believe no harm of her, yet there had been a breath across her perfection; there was something to explain; and Mary in her heart felt a pang of momentary anguish as acute as if the accusation had been true. To have to defend herself; to clear up her character to her boy! She took him into her arms almost that she might not have to look him in the face, and held to him, feeling giddy and faint. Will was younger, and he

himself had gone wrong, but Hugh was old enough to understand it all, and had no consciousness on his own side to blunt his perceptions; and to have to tell him how it all was, and explain to him that she was not guilty was almost as hard as if she had been obliged to confess that she was guilty. She could not encounter him face to face, nor meet frankly the wonder and dismay which were no doubt in his honest eyes. Mary thought that to look into them and see that wondering troubled question in them, "Is it so—have you done me this wrong?" would be worse than being killed once for all by a straightforward blow.

But there was no such thought in Hugh's mind. He came up to his mother open-hearted, with no hesitation in his looks. He saw Will was there, but he did not even look at him; he took her into his arms, holding her fast with perhaps a sense that she clung to him, and held on by him as by a support. "Mother, don't be distressed," he said, all at once, "I have found a way to clear it all up." He spoke out loud, with his cheery voice which it was exhilarating to hear, and as if he meant it, and felt the full significance of what he said. He had to put down his mother very gently on the sofa after, and to make her lie back and prop her up

with cushions; her high-strung nerves for an instant gave way. It was as if her natural protector had come back, whose coming would clear away the mists. Her own fears melted away from her when she felt the warm clasp of Hugh's arms, and the confident tone of his voice, not asking any questions, but giving her assurance, a pledge of sudden safety as it were. It was this that made Mary drop back, faint though not fainting, upon the friendly pillows, and made the room and everything swim in her eyes.

"What is it, Hugh?" she said faintly, as soon as she could speak.

"It is all right, mother," said Hugh; "take my word, and don't bother yourself any more about it. I came on at once to see Uncle Penrose, and get him out of this mess he has let himself into. I could be angry, but it is no good being angry. On the whole, perhaps showing him his folly and making a decided end to it, is the best."

"Oh, Hugh, never mind Uncle Penrose. Will, my poor Will! look, your brother is there," said Mary, rousing up. As for Hugh, he took no notice; he did not turn round, though his mother put her hand on his arm; perhaps because his mind was full of other things.

"We must have it settled at once," he said. "I hope you will not object, mother; it can be done very quietly. I found them last night, without the least preparation or even knowing they were in existence. It was like a dream to me. Don't perplex yourself about it, mother dear. It's all right—trust to me."

"Whom, did you find?" said Mary, eagerly; "or was it the lines—my lines?"

"It was old Sommerville's daughter," said Hugh, with an unsteady laugh, "who was *there*. I don't believe you know who old Sommerville or his daughter are. Never mind; I know all about it. I am not so simple as you were when you were eighteen and ran away and thought of nobody. And she says I am like my father," said Hugh, "the Captain, they called him—but not such a bonnie lad; and that there was nobody to be seen like him for happiness and brightness on his wedding-day. You see I know it all, mother—every word; and I am like him, but not such a bonnie lad."

"No," said Mary, with a sob. Her resolution had gone from her with her misery. She had suddenly grown weak and happy, and ready to weep like a child. "No," she said, with the tears dropping out of her eyes, "you are not

such a bonnie lad; you are none of you so handsome as your father. Oh, Hugh, my dear, I don't know what you mean—I don't understand what you say."

And she did not understand it, but that did not matter—she could not have understood it at that moment, though he had given her the clearest explanation. She knew nothing, but that there must be deliverance somehow, somewhere, in the air, and that her firstborn was standing by her with light and comfort in his eyes, and that behind, out of her sight, his brother taking no notice of him, was her other boy.

"Will is there," she said, hurriedly. "You have not spoken to him—tell me about this after. Oh, Hugh, Will is there!"

She put her hand on his arm and tried to turn him round; but Hugh's countenance darkened, and became as his mother had never seen it before. He took no notice of what she said, he only bent over her, and began to arrange the cushions, of which Mary now seemed to feel no more need.

"I do not like to see you here," he said; "you must come out of this house. I came that it might be all settled out of hand, for it is too serious to leave in vain suspense. But after this,

mother, neither you nor I, with my will, shall cross this threshold more."

"But oh, Hugh! Will!—speak to Will. Do not leave him unnoticed!" said Mary, in a passionate whisper, grasping his hand and reaching up to his ear.

Hugh's look did not relent. His face darkened while she looked at him.

"He is a traitor!" he said, from out his closed lips. And he turned his back upon his brother, who sat at the other side of the room, straining all his faculties to keep awake, and to keep the room steady, which was going round and round him, and to know something of what it all meant.

"He is your brother," said Mary; and then she rose, though she was still weak. "I must go to my poor boy, if you will not," she said. "Will!"

When Will heard the sound of her voice, which came strange to him, as if it came from another world, he too stumbled up upon his feet, though in the effort ceiling and floor and walls got all confused to him and floated about, coming down on his brain as if to crush him.

"Yes, mamma," he said; and came straight forward, dimly guiding himself, as it were, towards her. He came against the furniture with-

out knowing it, and struck himself sharply against the great round table, which he walked straight to as if he could have passed through it. The blow made him pause and open his heavy eyes, and then he sank into the nearest chair, with a weary sigh; and at that crisis of fate—at that moment when vengeance was overtaking him—when his cruel hopes had come to nothing, and his punishment was beginning—dropped asleep before their eyes. Even Hugh turned to look at the strange spectacle. Will was ghastly pale. His long brown hair hung disordered about his face; his hands clung in a desolate way to the arms of the chair he had got into; and he had dropped asleep.

At this moment Mrs. Ochterlony forgot her eldest son, upon whom till now her thoughts had been centred. She went to her boy who needed her most, and who lay there in his forlorn youth helpless and half unconscious, deserted as it were by all consolation. She went to him and put her hand upon his hot forehead, and called him by his name. Once more Will half opened his eyelids; he said "yes, mamma," drearily, with a confused attempt to look up; and then he slept again. He slept, and yet he did not sleep; her voice went into his mind as in the midst of a dream—something weighed upon his nerves

and his soul. He heard the cry she gave, even vaguely felt her opening his collar, putting back his hair, putting water to his lips—but he had not fainted, which was what she thought in her panic. He was only asleep.

"He is ill," said Hugh, who, notwithstanding his just indignation, was moved by the pitiful sight; "I will go for the doctor. Mother, don't be alarmed, he is only asleep."

"Oh, my poor boy!" cried Mary, "he was wandering about all yesterday, not to see me, and I was hard upon him. Oh, Hugh, my poor boy! And in this house."

This was the scene upon which Mr. Penrose came in to luncheon with his usual cheerful composure. He met Hugh at the door going for a doctor, and stopped him; "You here, Hugh," he said, "this is very singular. I am glad you are showing so much good sense; now we can come to some satisfactory arrangement. I hardly hoped so soon to assemble all the parties here."

"Good morning, I will see you later," said Hugh, passing him quickly and hurrying out. Then it struck Mr. Penrose that all was not well. "Mary, what is the matter?" he said; "is it possible that you are so weak as to encourage your son in standing out?"

Mary had no leisure, no intelligence for what he said. She looked at him for a moment vaguely, and then turned her eyes once more upon her boy. She had drawn his head on to her shoulder, and stood supporting him, holding his hands, gazing down in anxiety beyond all words upon the colourless face, with its heavy eyelids closed, and lips a little apart, and quick irregular breath. She was speaking to him softly without knowing it, saying, "Will, my darling—Will, my poor boy—Oh, Will, speak to me;" while he lay back unconscious now, no longer able to struggle against the weight that oppressed him, sleeping heavily on her breast. Mr. Penrose drew near and looked wonderingly, with his hand in his pocket and a sense that it was time for luncheon, upon this unexpected scene.

"What is the matter?" he said, "is he asleep? What are you making a fuss about, Mary? You women always like a fuss; he is tired, I daresay, after yesterday; let him sleep and he'll be all right. But don't stand there and tire yourself. Hollo, Will, wake up and lie down on the sofa. There goes the gong."

"Let us alone, uncle," said Mary, piteously; "never mind us. Go and get your luncheon. My poor boy is going to be ill; but Hugh is

coming back, and we will have him removed before he gets worse."

"Nonsense!" said Mr. Penrose; but still he looked curiously at the pale sleeping face, and drew a step further off—"not cholera, do you think?" he asked, with a little anxiety—"collapse, eh?—it can't be that?"

"Oh, uncle, go away and get your luncheon, and leave us alone," said Mary, whose heart fainted within her at the question, even though she was aware of its absurdity. "Do not be afraid, for we will take him away."

Mr. Penrose gave a "humph," partly indignant, partly satisfied, and walked about the room for a minute, making it shake with his portly form. And then he gave a low, short whistle, and went downstairs, as he was told. Quite a different train of speculation had entered into his mind when he uttered that sound. If Wilfrid should die, the chances were that some distant set of Ochterlonys, altogether unconnected with himself, would come in for the estate, supposing Will's claim in the meantime to be substantiated. Perhaps even yet it could be hushed up; for to see a good thing go out of the family was more than he could bear. This was what Mr. Penrose was thinking of as he went downstairs.

It seemed to Mary a long time before Hugh

came back with the doctor, but yet it was not long; and Will still lay asleep, with his head upon her shoulder, but moving uneasily at times, and opening his eyes now and then. There could be no doubt that he was going to be ill, but what the illness was to be, whether serious and malignant, or the mere result of over-fatigue, over-tension and agitation of mind, even the doctor could not tell. But at least it was possible to remove him, which was a relief to all. Mary did not know how the afternoon passed. She saw Hugh coming and going as she sat by her sick boy, whom they had laid upon the sofa, and heard him downstairs talking to uncle Penrose, and then she was aware by the sound of carriage-wheels at the door that he had come to fetch them; but all her faculties were hushed and quieted as by the influence of poor Will's sleep. She did not feel as if she had interest enough left in the great question that had occupied her so profoundly on the previous night as to ask what new light it was which Hugh had seemed to her for one moment to throw on it. A momentary wonder thrilled through her mind once or twice while she sat and waited; but then Will would stir, or his heavy eyelids would lift unconsciously and she would be recalled to the present calamity, which seemed

nearer and more appalling than any other. She sat in the quiet, which, for Will's sake, had to be unbroken, and in her anxiety and worn-out condition, herself by times slept "for sorrow," like those disciples among the olive-trees. And all other affairs fell back in her mind, as into a kind of twilight—a secondary place. It did not seem to matter what happened, or how things came to be decided. She had had no serious illness to deal with for many, many years—almost never before in her life since those days when she lost her baby in India; and her startled mind leapt forward to all tragic possibilities—to calamity and death. It was a dull day, which, no doubt, deepened every shadow. The grey twilight seemed to close in over her before the day was half spent, and the blinds were drawn down over the great staring windows, as it was best they should be for Will, though the sight of them gave Mary a pang. All these conjoined circumstances drove every feeling out of her mind but anxiety for her boy's life, and hushed her faculties, and made her life beat low, and stilled all other interests and emotions in her breast.

Then there came the bustle in the house which was attendant upon Will's removal. Mr. Penrose stood by, and made no objection to it. He was satisfied, on the whole, that whatever it might be

[illegible]

... said Mary, ... [illegible]

into his commodious house. It appeared, on the whole, that it did not matter much to them, though they had made so great a fuss about it. Hugh was the eldest son, even though, perhaps, he might not be the heir; and Will, poor boy, was the youngest, the one to be guarded and taken care of; and whatever the truth might be about Mary's marriage, she was their mother; and even at this very moment, when they might have been thought to be torn asunder, and separated from each other, nature had stepped in and they were all one. It was strange, but so it

was. Mr. Penrose had even spoken to Hugh, but had drawn nothing from him but anxiety about the sick boy, to find the best doctor, and the best possible place to remove him to; not a word about the private arrangement he had, no doubt, come to make, or the transfer of Earlston; and if Will should die, perhaps, it could yet be hushed up. This was the last idea in Mr. Penrose's mind, as he went in and shut behind him the resounding door.



CHAPTER XV.

THE illness of Will took a bad turn. Instead of being a mere accumulation of cold and fatigue, it developed into fever, and of the most dangerous kind. Perhaps he had been bringing it on for a long time by his careless ways, by his long nights and over thought; and that day of wretched wandering, and all the confused agitation of his mind had brought it to a climax. This at least was all that could be said. He was very ill; he lay for six weeks between life and death; and Mrs. Ochterlony, in his sick-room, had no mind nor understanding for anything but the care of him. Aunt Agatha would have come to help her, but she wanted no help. She lived as women do live at such times, without knowing how—without sleep, without food, without air, without rest to her mind or comfort to her heart. Except, indeed, in Hugh's face,

which was as anxious as her own, but looked in upon her watching, from time to time like a face out of heaven. She had been made to understand all about it—how her prayer had been granted, and the cup had passed from her, and her honour and her children's had been vindicated for ever. She had been made to understand this, and had given God thanks, and felt one weight the less upon her soul; but yet she did not understand it any more than Will did, who in his wanderings talked without cease of the looks his mother gave him; and what had he done? He would murmur by the hour such broken unreason as he had talked to Mary the morning before he was taken ill—that he meant to injure nobody—that all he wanted was his rights—that he would do anything for Hugh or for his mother—only he must have his rights; and why did they all look at him so, and what did Nelly mean, and what had he done? Mrs. Ochterlony sitting by his bedside with tears on her pale cheeks came to a knowledge of his mind which she had never possessed before—as clear a knowledge as was possible to a creature of so different a nature. And she gave God thanks in her heart that the danger had been averted, and remembered, in a confused way, the name of old Sommerville, which had been engraved on her memory years

[illegible] her husband [illegible] her into the [illegible] much misery. Mary [illegible] how it was that [illegible] Somerville's name came back with the sense of [illegible]. For the moment she would scarcely have been surprised to know that he had come to life again to remedy the wrongs his death had brought about. All that she knew was that his name was involved in it, and that Hugh was shielded and the danger over. She said [illegible] herself sometimes in an apologetic way as if to account to herself for the suddenness with which all interest in the subject had passed out of her thoughts. The danger was over. Two dangers so appalling could not exist together. The chances are that Will's immediate and present peril would have engrossed her all the same, even had all not been well for Hugh.

When he had placed his mother and brother in the rooms he had taken for them, and had seen poor Will laid down on the bed he was not to quit for long, Hugh went back to see Mr. Penrose. He was agitated and excited, and much melted in his heart by his brother's illness; but still, though he might forgive Will, he had no thought of forgiving the elder man, who ought to have given the boy better counsel: but he was very cool and collected, keeping his indigna-

tion to himself, and going very fully into detail. Old Sommerville's daughter had been married, and lived with her husband at the border village where Mary's marriage had taken place. It was she who had waited on the bride, with all the natural excitement and interest belonging to the occasion; and her husband and she, young themselves, and full of sympathy with the handsome young couple, had stolen in after them into the homely room where the marriage ceremony, such as it was, was performed. The woman who told Hugh this story had not the faintest idea that suspicion of any kind rested upon the facts she was narrating, neither did her hearer tell her of it. He had listened with what eagerness, with what wonder and delight may be imagined, while she went into all the details. "She mayn't mind me, but I mind her," the anxious historian had said, her thoughts dwelling not on the runaway marriage she was talking of, as if that could be of importance, but on the unbuilt lodge, and the chances of getting it if she could but awake the interest of the young squire. "She had on but a cotton gown, as was not for the likes of her on her wedding-day, and a bit of a straw-bonnet; and it was me as took off her shawl, her hands being trembly a bit, as was to be expected; I took her shawl off afore she came

into the room, and I slipped in after her, and made Rob come, though he was shy. Bless your heart, sir, the Captain and the young lady never noticed him nor me."

Hugh had received all these details into his mind with a distinctness which only the emergency could have made possible. It seemed to himself that he saw the scene—more clearly, far more clearly, than that dim vision of the other scene in India, which now he ventured in his heart to believe that he recollected too. He told everything to Mr. Penrose, who sat with glum countenance, and listened. "And now, uncle," he said, "I will tell you what my mother is ready to do. I don't think she understands what I have told her about my evidence; but I found this letter she had been writing when Will was taken ill. You can read it if you please. It will show you at least how wrong you were in thinking she would ever desert and abandon me."

"I never thought she would desert and abandon you," said Mr. Penrose; "of course every one must see that so long as you had the property it was her interest to stick to you—as well as for her own sake. I don't see why I should read the letter; I daresay it is some bombastical appeal to somebody—she appealed

to me last night—to believe her; as if personal credibility was to be built upon in the absence of all proofs."

"But read it all the same," said Hugh, whose face was flushed with excitement.

Mr. Penrose put on his spectacles, and took the half-finished letter reluctantly into his hand. He turned it round and all over to see who it was addressed to; but there was no address; and when he began to read it, he saw it was a letter to a lawyer, stating her case distinctly, and asking for advice. Was there not a way of getting it tried and settled, Mary had written; was there not some court that could be appealed to at once, to examine all the evidence, and make a decision that would be good and stand, and could not be re-opened? "I am ready to appear and be examined, to do anything or everything that is necessary," were the last words Mrs. Ochterlony had written; and then she had forgotten her letter, forgotten her resolution and her fear, and everything else in the world but her boy who was ill. Her other boy, after he had set her heart free to devote itself to the one who now wanted her most, had found the letter; and he, too, had been set free in his turn. Up to that very last moment he had feared and doubted what Mr. Penrose called the

"exposure" for his mother; he had been afraid of wounding her, afraid of making any suggestion that could imply publicity. And upon the letter which Mr. Penrose turned thus about in his hand was at least one large round blister of a tear—a big drop of compunction, and admiration, and love, which had dropped upon it out of Hugh's proud and joyful eyes.

"Ah," said Uncle Penrose, who was evidently staggered: and he took off his spectacles and put them back in their case. "If she were to make up her mind to *that,*" he continued slowly, "I would not say that you might not have a chance. It would have the look of being confident in her case. I'll tell you what, Hugh," he went on, changing his tone. "Does the doctor give much hope of Will?"

"Much hope!" cried Hugh, faltering. "Good heavens! uncle, what do you mean? Has he told you anything? Why, there is every chance—every hope."

"Don't get excited," said Mr. Penrose. "I hope so I am sure. But what I have to say is this: if anything were to happen to Will, it would be some distant Ochterlonys, I suppose, that would come in after him—supposing you were put aside, you know. I don't mind working for Will, but I'd have nothing to do

with that. *I* could not be the means of sending the property out of the family. And I don't see now, in the turn things have taken, that there would be any particular difficulty between ourselves in hushing it all up."

"In hushing it up?" said Hugh, with an astonished look.

"Yes, if we hold our tongues. I daresay that is all that would be necessary," said Mr. Penrose. "If you only would have the good sense all of you to hold your tongues and keep your counsel, it might be easily hushed up."

But Uncle Penrose was not prepared for the shower of indignation that fell upon him. Hugh got up and made him an oration, which the young man poured forth out of the fulness of his heart; and said, God forgive him for the harm he had done to one of them, for the harm he had tried to do to all—in a tone very little in harmony with the prayer; and shook off, as it were, the dust off his feet against him, and rushed from the house, carrying, folded up carefully in his pocket-book, his mother's letter. It was she who had found out what to do—she whose reluctance, whose hesitation, or shame, was the only thing that Hugh would have feared. And it was not only that he was touched to the heart by his mother's readiness to do all and

everything for him; he was proud, too, with that sweetest of exultation which recognises the absolute *best* in its best beloved. So he went through the suburban streets carrying his head high, with moisture in his eyes, but the smile of hope and a satisfied heart upon his lips. Hush it up! when it was all to her glory from the first to the last of it. Rather write it up in letters of gold, that all the world might see it. This was how Hugh, being still so young, in the pride and emotion of the moment, thought in his heart.

And Mrs. Ochterlony, by her boy's sick-bed, knew nothing of it all. She remembered to ask for her blotting-book with the letters in it which she had been writing, but was satisfied when she heard Hugh had it; and she accepted the intervention of old Sommerville, dead or living, without demanding too many explanations. She had now something else more absorbing, more engrossing, to occupy her, and two supreme emotions cannot hold place in the mind at the same time. Will required constant care, an attention that never slumbered, and she would not have any one to share her watch with her. She found time to write to Aunt Agatha, who wanted to come, giving the cheerfullest view of matters that was possible, and declaring that she was

quite able for what she had to do. And Mary had another offer of assistance which touched her, and yet brought a smile to her face. It was from Mrs. Kirkman, offering to come to her assistance at once, to leave all her responsibilities for the satisfaction of being with her friend and sustaining her strength and being "useful" to the poor sufferer. It was a most anxious letter, full of the warmest entreaties to be allowed to come, and Mary was moved by it, though she gave it to Hugh to read with a faint smile on her lip.

"I always told you she was a good woman," said Mrs. Ochterlony. "If I were to let her come, I know she would make a slave of herself to serve us both."

"But you will not let her come," said Hugh, with a little alarm; "I don't know about your good woman. She would do it, and then tell everybody how glad she was that she had been of so much use."

"But she is a good woman in spite of her talk," said Mary; and she wrote to Mrs. Kirkman a letter which filled the soul of the colonel's wife with many thoughts. Mrs. Ochterlony wrote to her that it would be vain for her to have any help, for she could not leave her boy—could not be apart from him while he was so ill, was

what Mary said—but that her friend knew how strong she was, and that it would not hurt her, if God would but spare her boy. "Oh, my poor Will! don't forget to think of him," Mary said, and the heart which was in Mrs. Kirkman's wordy bosom knew what was meant. And then partly, perhaps, it was her fault; she might have been wise, she might have held her peace when Will came to ask that fatal information. And yet, perhaps, it might be for his good—or perhaps—perhaps, God help him, he might die. And then Mrs. Kirkman's heart sank within her, and she was softer to all the people in her district, and did not feel so sure of taking upon her the part of Providence. She could not but remember how she had prayed that Mary should not be let alone, and how Major Ochterlony had died after it, and she had felt that that was not what she meant, and that God, so to speak, had gone too far. If the same thing were to happen again! She was humble and softened to all her people that day, and she spent hours of it upon her knees, praying with tears streaming down her cheeks for Will. And it was not till full twenty-four hours after that she could take any real comfort from the thought that it must be for all their good; which shows that Mrs. Ochterlony's idea of her after all was right.

These were but momentary breaks in the long stretch of pain, and terror, and lingering and sickening hope. Day after day went and came, and Mary took no note of them, and knew nothing more of them than as they grew light and dark upon the pale face of her boy. Hugh had to leave her by times, but there was no break to her in the long-continued vigil. His affairs had to go on, his work to be resumed, and his life to proceed again as if it had never come to that full stop. But as for Mary, it began to appear to her as if she had lived all her life in that sick room. Then Islay came, always steady and trustworthy. This was towards the end, when it was certain that the crisis must be approaching for good or for evil. And poor Aunt Agatha in her anxiety and her loneliness had fallen ill too, and wrote plaintive, suffering letters, which moved Mary's heart even in the great stupor of her own anxiety. It was then that Hugh went, much against his will, to the Cottage, at his mother's entreaty, to carry comfort to the poor old lady. He had to go to Earlston to see after his own business, and from thence to Aunt Agatha, whose anxiety was no less great at a distance than theirs was at hand; and Hugh was to be telegraphed for at once if there was "any change." Any change!—that was the way

they had got to speak, saying it in a whisper, as if afraid to trust the very air with words which implied so much. Hugh stole into the sick room before he went away, and saw poor Will, or at least a long white outline of a face, with two big startling eyes, black and shining, which must be Will's, lying back on the pillows; and he heard a babble of weary words about his mother and Nelly, and what had he done? and withdrew as noiselessly as he entered, with the tears in his eyes, and that poignant and intolerable anguish in his heart with which the young receive the first intimation that one near to them must go away. It seemed an offence to Hugh, as he left the house to see so many lads in the streets, who were of Will's age, and so many children encumbering the place everywhere, unthought of, uncared for, unloved, to whom almost it would be a benefit to die. But it was not one of them who was to be taken, but Will, poor Will, the youngest, who had been led astray, and had still upon his mind a sense of guilt. Hugh was glad to go to work at Earlston to get the thought out of his mind, glad to occupy himself about the museum, and to try to forget that his brother was slowly approaching the crisis, after which perhaps there might be no hope; and his heart beat loud in his ears every time he heard a

sound, dreading that it might be the promised summons, and that "some change"—dreadful intimation—had occurred; and it was in the same state of mind that he went on to the Cottage, looking into the railway people's faces at every station to see if, perhaps, they had heard something. He was not much like carrying comfort to anybody. He had never been within reach of the shadow of death before, except in the case of his uncle; and his uncle was old, and it was natural he should die—but Will! Whenever he said, or heard, or even thought the name his heart seemed to swell, and grow "grit," as the Cumberland folks said, and climb into his throat.

But yet there was consolation to Hugh even at such a moment. When he arrived at the Cottage he found Nelly there in attendance upon Aunt Agatha; and Nelly was full of wistful anxiety, and had a world of silent questions in her eyes. He had not written to her in answer to her letter, though it had done so much for him. Nobody had written to the girl, who was obliged to stay quiet at home, and ask no questions, and occupy herself about other matters. And no doubt Nelly had suffered and might have made herself very unhappy, and felt herself deeply neglected and injured, had she been of that manner

. [illegible]. She had heard only the evident facts which everybody knew of—that Will had been taken ill, and that Hugh was in Liverpool, and even Islay had been sent for: but whether Will's illness was anything more than ordinary illness, or how the family affairs which lay underneath, were being settled, Nelly could not tell. Nobody knew, not Aunt Agatha, nor Mrs. Kirkman, though it was her hand which had helped to set everything in motion. Sometimes it occurred to Nelly that Mr. Hugh might have written to her: sometimes she was disposed to fear that he might be angry—might think she had no right to interfere. Men did not like people to interfere with their affairs, she said to herself sometimes, even when they meant—oh! the very kindest; and Nelly dried her eyes and would acknowledge to herself that it was just. But when Hugh came, and was in the same room with her, and sat by her side, and was just the same—nay, perhaps, if that could be, more than just the same—then it was more than Nelly's strength of mind could do to keep from questioning him with her eyes. She gave little glances at him which asked—"Is all well?"—in language plainer than words; and Hugh's eyes, overcast as they were by that shadow of death

which was upon them, could not answer promptly —"All is well." And Aunt Agatha knew nothing of this secret which lay between them; so far as Miss Seton had been informed as yet, Will's running away had been but a boyish freak, and his illness an ordinary fever. And yet somehow it made Hugh take a brighter view of everything— made him think less drearily of Will's danger, and be less alarmed about the possible arrival of a telegram, when he read the question in Nelly Askell's eyes.

But it was the morning after his arrival before he could make any response. Aunt Agatha, who was an invalid, did not come downstairs early, and the two young creatures were left to each other's company. Then there ensued a little interval of repose to Hugh's mind, which had been so much disturbed of late, which he did not feel willing to break even by entering upon matters which might produce a still greater confidence and *rapprochement*. All that had been passing lately had given a severe shock to his careless youth, which, before that, had never thought deeply of anything. And to feel himself thus separated as it were from the world of anxiety and care he had been living in, and floated in to this quiet nook, and seated here all

tranquil in a nameless exquisite happiness, with Nelly by him, and nobody to interfere with him, did him good, poor fellow. He did not care t break the spell even to satisfy her, nor perhaps to produce a more exquisite delight for himself. The rest, and the sweet unexpressed sympathy, and the soft atmosphere that was about him, gave Hugh all the consolation of which at this moment he was capable; and he was only a man—and he was content to be thus consoled without inquiring much whether it was as satisfactory for her. It was only when the ordinary routine of the day began, and disturbed the *tête-à-tête*, that he bethought him of how much remained to be explained to Nelly; and then he asked her to go out with him to the garden. "Come and show me the roses we used to water," said Hugh; "you remember?" And so they went out together, with perhaps, if that were possible, a more entire possession of each other's society—a more complete separation from everybody else in the world.

They went to see the roses, and though they were fading and shabby, with the last flowers overblown and disconsolate, and the leaves dropping off the branches, that melancholy sight made little impression on Nelly and Hugh. The two indulged in certain reminiscences of what had

been, "you remember?"—comings back of the sweet recent untroubled past, such as give to the pleasant present and fair future their greatest charm. And then all at once Hugh stopped short, and looked in his companion's face. He said it without the least word of introduction, leaping at once into the heart of the subject, in a way which gave poor Nelly no warning, no time to prepare.

"Nelly," he said, all at once, "I never thanked you for your letter."

"Oh, Mr. Hugh!" cried Nelly, and her heart gave a sudden thump, and the water sprang to her eyes. She was so much startled that she put her hand to her side to relieve the sudden panting of her breath. "I was going to ask you if you had been angry?" she added, after a pause.

"Angry! How could I be angry?" said Hugh.

"You might have thought it was very impertinent of me talking of things I had no business with," said Nelly, with downcast eyes.

"Impertinent! Perhaps you suppose I would think an angel impertinent if it came down from heaven for a moment, and showed a little interest in my concerns?" said Hugh. "And do you really think you have no business with me, Nelly? I did not think you were so indifferent to your friends."

[illegible] was dangerous, [illegible] this nonsense— [illegible] Mrs. [illegible] she said.

"And I have never told you that I had some [illegible]," said Hugh. "I was so [illegible] at first I had no time for writing letters; and last night there was [illegible] who knows nothing about it, and this morning—well this morning you know I was thinking of nothing but you——"

"Oh, thank you," said Nelly, with a little confusion, "but tell me more, please. You said it was all right——"

"Yes," said Hugh, "but I don't know if it ever would have come right but for your letter; I was down as low as ever a man could be; I had no heart for anything; I did not know what to think even about my——about anything. And then your dear little letter came. It was *that* that made me something of a man again. And I made up my mind to face it and not to give in. And then all at once the proof came—some people who lived at Gretna and had seen the marriage. Did you go there?"

"No," said Nelly, with a tremulous voice; and now whatever might come of it, it would have been quite impossible for her to raise her eyes.

"Ah, I see," said Hugh, "it was only to show me what to do—but all the same it was your doing. If you had not written to me like that, I was more likely to have gone and hanged myself, than to have minded my business and seen the people. Nelly, I will always say it was you."

"No—no," said Nelly, withdrawing, not without some difficulty, her hand out of his. "Never mind me; I am so glad—I am so very glad; but then I don't know about dear Mrs. Ochterlony—and oh, poor Will!"

His brother's name made Hugh fall back a little. He had very nearly forgotten everything just then except Nelly herself. But when he remembered that his brother, perhaps, might be dying——

"You know how ill he is," he said, with a little shudder. "Nelly, it must be selfish to be happy. I had almost forgotten about poor Will."

"Oh, no, no," cried Nelly; "We must not forget about him; he never could mean it—he would have come to himself one day. Oh, Mr. Hugh——"

[illegible]

[illegible] the young man. [illegible] should not say I now. But [illegible] I'll never mail I not want your [illegible] and there are good news you [illegible] Oh, Nelly, don't keep

silent like that, and turn your head away—you know there is nobody in the world that loves you like me."

"Oh, please don't say any more just now," said Nelly, through her tears. "When I think of poor Will who is perhaps—— And he and I were babies together; it is not right to be so happy when poor Will—— Yes, oh yes—another time I will not mind."

And even then poor Nelly did not mind. They were both so young, and the sick boy was far away from them, not under their eyes as it were; and even whatever might happen, it could not be utter despair for Hugh and Nelly. They were selfish so far as they could not help being selfish — they had their moment of delight standing there under the faded roses, with the dead leaves dropping at their feet. Neither autumn nor any other chill—neither anxiety nor suspense, nor even the shadow of death could keep them asunder. Had not they the more need of each other if trouble was coming? That was Hugh's philosophy, and Nelly's heart could not say him nay.

But when that moment was over Aunt Agatha's voice was heard calling from an upper window. "Hugh, Hugh!" the old lady called. "I see

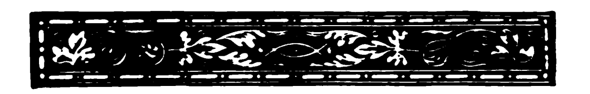
a man leaving the station with a letter in his hand—it is the man who brings the telegraph—oh, Hugh, my dear boy!"

Hugh did not stop to hear any more. He woke up in a moment out of himself, and rushed forth upon the road to meet the messenger, leaving Nelly and his joy behind him. He felt as if he had been guilty then, but as he flew along the road he had no time to think. As for poor Nelly, she took to walking up and down the lawn, keeping him in sight, with limbs that trembled under her, and eyes half blind with tears and terror. Nelly had suffered to some extent from the influence of Mrs. Kirkman's training. She could not feel sure that to be very happy, nay blessed, to feel one's self full of joy and unmingled content, was not something of an offence to God. Perhaps it was selfish and wicked at that moment, and now the punishment might be coming. If it should be so, would it not be *her* fault. She who had let herself be persuaded, who ought to have known better. Aunt Agatha sat at her window, sobbing, and saying little prayers aloud without knowing it. "God help my Mary! Oh God, help my poor Mary! give her strength to bear it!" was what Aunt Agatha said. And poor Nelly for her

part put up another prayer, speechless, in an agony—"God forgive us," she said, in her innocent heart.

But all at once both of them stopped praying, stopped weeping, and gave one simultaneous cry, that thrilled through the whole grey landscape. And this was why it was:—Hugh, a distant figure on the road, had met the messenger, had torn open the precious dispatch. It was too far off to tell them in words, or make any other intelligible sign. What he did was to fling his hat into the air and give a wild shout, which they saw rather than heard. Was it all well? Nelly went to the gate to meet him, and held by it, and Aunt Agatha come tottering downstairs. And what he did next was to tear down the road like a racehorse, the few country folks about it staring at him as if he were mad,—and to seize Nelly in his arms in open day, on the open road, and kiss her publicly before Aunt Agatha, and Peggy, and all the world. "She said she would not mind," cried Hugh, breathless, coming headlong into the garden, "as soon as we heard that Will was going to get well; and there's the despatch, Aunt Agatha, and Nelly is to be my wife."

This was how two joyful events in the Ochterlony family intimated themselves at the same moment to Miss Seton and her astonished house.



CHAPTER XVI.

AND this was how it all ended, so far as any end can be said to have come to any episode in human history. While Will was still only recovering —putting his recollections slowly together—and not very certain about them, what they were, Hugh and his mother went through the preliminaries necessary to have Mrs. Ochterlony's early marriage proved before the proper court—a proceeding which Mary did not shrink from when the time came that she could look calmly over the whole matter, and decide upon the best course. She was surprised to see her own unfinished letter preserved so carefully in Hugh's pocketbook. "Put it in the fire," she said to him, "it will only put us in mind of painful things if you keep it;" and it did not occur to Mary why it was that her son smiled and put it back in its place, and kissed her hand, which grown thin and white in her long seclusion. then he told her of Nelly, and Mrs.

Ochterlony was glad—glad to the bottom of her heart, and yet touched by a momentary pang for which she was angry with herself. He had stood by her so in all this time of trial, and now he was about to remove himself a little, ever so little further off from her, though he was her first-born and her pride; but then she despised herself, who could grudge, even for half a moment, his reward to Hugh, and made haste to make amends for it, even though he was unconscious of the offence.

"I always thought she should have been my child," Mary said, "the very first time I saw her. I had once one like her; and I hungered and thirsted for Nelly when I saw her first. I did not think of getting her like this. I will love her as if she were my own, Hugh."

"And so she will be your own," said Hugh, not knowing the difference. And he was so happy that the sight of him made his mother happy, though she had care enough in the meantime for her individual share.

For it may be supposed that Will, such a youth as he was, did not come out of his fever changed and like a little child. Such changes are few in this world, and a great sickness is not of necessity a moral agent. When the first languor and comfort of his convalescence was over, his mind

began to revive and to join things together, as was natural—and he did not know where or how he had broken off in the confused and darkling story that returned to his brain as he pondered. He had forgotten, or never understood about all that happened on the day he was taken ill, but yet a dreamy impression that some break had come to his plans, that there was some obstacle, something that made an end of his rights, as he still called them in his mind, hovered about his recollections. He was as frank and open as it was natural to his character to be, for the first few days after he began to recover, before he had made much progress with his recollections; and then he became moody and thoughtful and perplexed, not knowing how to piece the story out. This was perhaps, next to death itself, the thing which Mary had most dreaded, and she saw that though his sickness had been all but death, it had not changed the character or identity of the pale boy absorbed in his own thoughts, uncommunicating and unyielding, whose weakness compelled him to obey her like an infant in everything external, yet whose heart gave her no such obedience. It was as unlike Hugh's frank exuberance of mind, and Islay's steady but open soul, as could be conceived. But yet he was her boy as much as either; as dear, perhaps even more

bound to her by the evil he had tried to do, and by the suffering he himself had borne. And now she had to think not only how to remedy the wrong he had attempted, and to put such harm out of his and everybody's power, but to set the discord in himself at rest, and to reconcile the jangled chords. It was this that gave her a preoccupied look even while Hugh spoke to her of all his plans. It was more difficult than appearing before the court, harder work perhaps than anything she had yet had in her hands to do—and hard as it was, it was she who had to seek the occasion and begin.

She had been sitting with her boy, one winterly afternoon, when all was quiet in the house—they were still in the lodging in Liverpool, not far from Mr. Penrose's, to which Will had been removed when his illness began; he was not well enough yet to be moved, and the doctors were afraid of cold, and very reluctant to send him, in his weak state, still further to the north. She had been reading to him, but he was evidently paying no attention to the reading, and she had left off and began to talk, but he had been impatient of the talk. He lay on the sofa by the fire, with his pale head against the pillow, looking thin, spectral, and shadowy, and yet with a weight of weary thought upon his overhanging brow,

and in his close compressed lips, which grieved his mother's heart.

"Will," she said suddenly, "I should like to speak to you frankly about what you have on your mind. You are thinking of what happened before you were taken ill?"

"Yes," he said, turning quickly upon her his great hollow eyes, shining with interest and surprise; and then he stopped short, and compressed his upper lip again, and looked at her with a watchful eye, conscious of the imperfection of his own memory, and unwilling to commit himself.

"I will go over it all, that we may understand each other," said Mary, though the effort made her own cheek pale. "You were told that I had been married in India just before you were born, and you were led to believe that your brothers were—were—illegitimate, and that you were your father's heir. I don't know if they ever told you, my poor boy, that I had been married in Scotland long before; at all events, they made you believe——"

"Made me believe!" said Will, with feverish haste; "do people generally marry each other more than once? I don't see how you can say 'made me believe.'"

"Well, Will, perhaps it seemed very clear as it

was told to you," said Mary, with a sigh; "and you have even so much warrant for your mistake, that your father too took fright, and thought because everybody was dead that saw us married that we ought to be married again; and I yielded to his wish, though I knew it was wrong. But it appears everybody was not dead; two people who were present have come to light very unexpectedly, and we have applied to that Court—that new Court, you know, where they treat such things—to have my marriage proved, and Hugh's legitimacy declared. It will cost some money, and it will not be pleasant to me; but better *that* than that such a mistake should ever be possible again."

Will looked in his mother's face, and knew and saw beyond all question that what she told him was absolute fact; not even *truth*, but fact; the sort of thing that can be proved by witnesses and established in law. His mouth which had been compressed so close, relaxed; his under lip drooped, his eyes hid themselves, as it were, under their lids. A sudden blank of mortification and humbled pride came over his soul. A mistake, simply a mistake, such a blunder as any fool might make, an error about simple facts which he might have set right if he had tried. And now for ever and ever he was nothing but

the youngest son, doubly indebted to everybody belonging to him; indebted to them for forgiveness, forbearance, tenderness, and services of every kind. He saw it all, and his heart rose up against it; he had tried to wrong them, and it was his punishment that they forgave him. It all seemed so hopeless and useless to struggle against, that he turned his face from the light, and felt as if it would be a relief if he could be able to be ill again, or if he had wounds that he could have secretly unbound; so that he might get to die, and be covered over and abandoned, and have no more to bear. Such thoughts were about as foreign to Mrs. Ochterlony's mind as any human cogitations could be, and yet she divined them, as it were, in the greatness of her pity and love.

"Will," she said, speaking softly in the silence which had been unbroken for long, "I want you to think if this had been otherwise, what it would have been for me. I would have been a woman shut out from all good women. I would have been only all the more wicked and wretched that I had succeeded in concealing my sin. You would have blushed for your mother whenever you had to name her name. You could not have kept me near you, because my presence would have shut against you every

honest house. You would have been obliged to conceal me and my shame in the darkness—to cover me over in some grave with no name on it—to banish me to the ends of the earth——"

"Mother!" said Will, rising up in his gaunt length and paleness on the sofa. He did not understand it. He saw her figure expanding, as it were, her eyes shining in the twilight like two great mournful stars, the hot colour rising to her face, her voice labouring with an excitement which had been long pent up and found no channel; and the thrill and jar in it of suppressed passion, made a thrill in his heart.

"And your father!" she went on, always with growing emotion, "whom you are all proud of, who died for his duty and left his name without a blot;—he would have been an impostor like me, a man who had taken base advantage of a woman, and deceived all his friends, and done the last wrong to his children,—we two that never wronged man nor woman, that would have given our lives any day for any one of you,—that is what you would have made us out!"

"Mother!" said Will. He could not bear it any longer. His heart was up at last, and spoke. He came to her, crept to her in his

weakness, and laid his long feeble arms round her as she sat hiding her face. "Mother! don't say that. I must have been mad. Not what *I* would have made you out——"

"Oh, my poor Will, my boy, my darling!" said Mary, "not you—I never meant you!"

And she clasped her boy close, and held him to her, not knowing what she meant. And then she roused herself to sudden recollection of his feebleness, and took him back to his sofa, and brooded over him like a bird over her nest. And after awhile Islay came in, bringing fresh air and news, and a breath from the outer world. And poor Will's heart being still so young, and having at last touched the depths, took a rebound and came up, not like, and yet not unlike the heart of a little child. From that time his moodiness, his heavy brow, his compressed lip, grew less apparent, and out of his long ponderings with himself there came sweeter fruits. He had been on the edge of a precipice, and he had not known it; and now that after the danger was over he had discovered that danger, such a thrill came over him as comes sometimes upon those who are the most fool- [illegible] the moment of peril. He had not seen [illegible]ess of the pit nor the terror of it until [illegible]ped.

But probably it was a relief to all, as it was a great relief to poor Will, when his doctor proposed a complete change for him, and a winter in the South. Mary had moved about very little since she brought her children home from India, and her spirit sank before the thought of travel in foreign parts, and among unknown tongues. But she was content when she saw the light come back to her boy's eye. And when he was well enough to move, they went away* together, Will and his mother, Mary and her boy. He was the one who needed her most.

And when Hugh and Nelly were married, the Percivals sent the little bride a present, very pretty, and of some value, which the Ochterlonys in general accepted as a peace-offering. Winnie's letter which accompanied it was not, however, very peaceful in its tone. "I daresay you think yourself very happy, my dear," Winnie wrote, "but I would not advise you to calculate upon too much happiness. I don't know if we were ever meant for that. Mary, who is the best woman among us, has had a terrible deal of trouble; and I, whom perhaps

* They went to San Remo, if any one would like to know, for no particular reason that I can tell, except that the beloved physician, Dr. Antonio, has thrown the shield of his protection over that picturesque little place, with its golden orange groves and its delicious sea.

[illegible] the worst, have not been [illegible] Mary. I wonder often, [illegible] any meaning at all in it. [illegible] there is. And you [illegible] if you like. My love [illegible] and if you like you can kiss [illegible] always was my favourite [illegible]"

[illegible] heard this letter with a [illegible] "[illegible] it is only Winnie's [illegible] to say strange things, but [illegible] like that." And perhaps on [illegible] Aunt Agatha that was worst off [illegible] She was left alone when the young [illegible] as was natural, in the spring; and [illegible] the mother Mary went away with her [illegible] Aunt Agatha had no child left to devote herself to, and it was very silent in the Cottage, where she sat for hours with nothing more companionable than the Henri-Deux ware, Francis Ochterlony's gift, before her eyes. And Sir Edward was very infirm that year. But yet Miss Seton found a consolation that few people would have thought of in the Henri Deux, and before the next winter Mary was to come home. And she had always her poor people and her letters, and the Kirtell singing softly under its dewy braes.

THE END.

13, Great Marlborough Street, October, 1866.

MESSRS. HURST AND BLACKETT'S

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